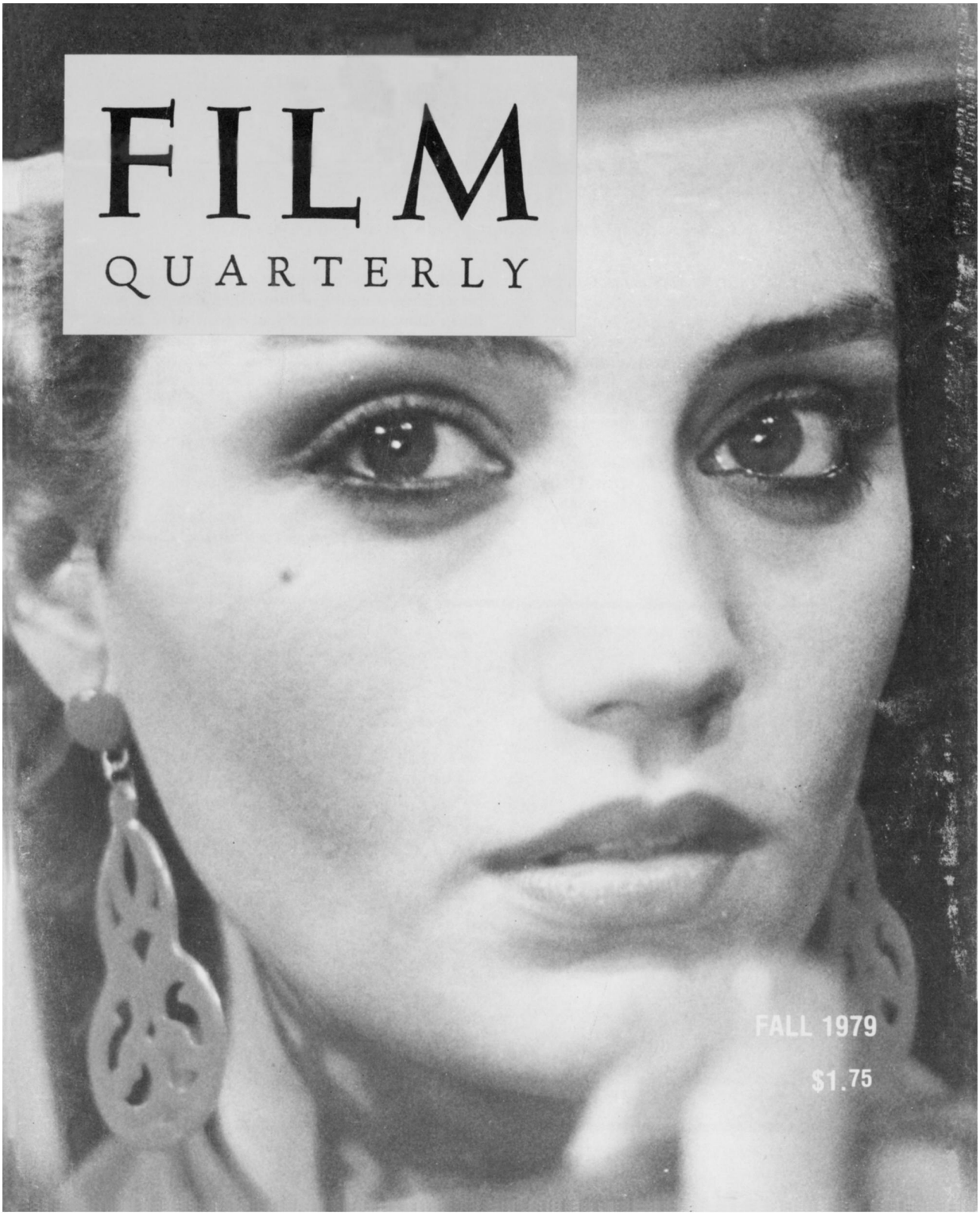
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Editor's Notebook

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RANDALL CONRAD

"I Am Not a Producer!" —Working with Buñuel

A CONVERSATION WITH SERGE SILBERMAN

"Here, I'm not my own boss," Serge Silberman apologized as he interrupted the conversation once again to answer the phone or the door in his suite at the Pierre. So it seemed, for on the eve of its premiere in New York his new production—Luis Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire*—still had no American distributor, in spite of a favorable press and trade screening earlier. I imagined that most of the calls Silberman was answering in gruff bursts of one language or another came from that business world he unwillingly belongs to.

Unwillingly? Granted there was some contradiction between the Pierre's chocolate cream environs and the philosophy of simplicity Silberman was imparting to me between interruptions. Yet Serge Silberman is an independent in a world of conglomerate deal-making, despite his temporary servitude in New York (the film was soon picked up by First Artists). One could even view him as a patron of art. He'd like that; he'd rather discuss creativity, the beauty of doubt, and the vitality of the irrational than the picture business, and he is the type of man who aristocratically spoke of the "confusion" of our time as if that abstraction belonged to a limpid universal vocabulary, as if it naturally referred to a moral *and* political reality —as writers spoke of "disorder" in the era before World War I and surrealism.

For me, this conversation adds some new touches to the traditional critical portrait of Luis Buñuel, whom Silberman has enabled to search for newer and freer forms of expression in the course of collaborating on five features (see the filmography). The picture emerges of a meticulous

Buñuel on the set of LE FANTÔME DE LA LIBERTÉ

artist, conscious of his public and responsibilities —cautious, if anything. Contrary to the cliché, Buñuel the artist very carefully refines his startling images (like that of the lacemaker in the concluding sequence of *That Obscure Object of Desire*) from scripting to shooting until they have the exact degree of ambivalence he believes they require, though their original inspiration may have come spontaneously. For this creative freedom, the cinema's profoundest poet has finally been able to rely upon the support, and the friendship, of an exceptional independent producer.

Are you the one who gets assassinated in the opening scenes of That Obscure Object of Desire?

Yes, sure that's me. I'm the one who gets in the car and says "To the bank!" It's a joke of ours. You know I already got killed in the opening shots of *The Phantom of Liberty.* You remember the execution in Spain? There are four captives against the wall. I'll tell you who they are. First me, with a band around my head. Second Buñuel, wearing a beard and a monk's robe. Third, the man who cries *"Vivan las cadenas"* is José Luis Barros, Buñuel's physician and friend. And the fourth one, the old man, is played by José Bergamin, the Spanish poet.* Buñuel wanted me next to him so we'd be shot together. The critics in France joked that he had me shot so we wouldn't have to make any more films.

We don't know much here about the making of The Phantom of Liberty. *The Spanish historical scenes are extremely beautiful . . . what with the crane shots and the extras all in costume, I was practically expecting a historical film. And then they're cut just like that! I loved that.*

We went right to the next scenes. We did the Spanish scenes for one reason—to have *Vivan las cadenas.* You know, that's the third of May, 1808, when the Spanish people preferred chains under their own king to the so-called freedom brought by Napoleon. And it's a fact they cried "Long live our chains" at that time.

And is the historical narrative a real work by Gustavo Becquer, as it says in the opening titles?

Oh Yes.

Are there other scenes in Phantom *that were documented or researched like the historical scenes?*

There are two things at the doctor's that are textual. When the doctor tells his patient he wants to operate and only later lets the man know he has cancer, that's taken from real life, and so is his line, "If you go on this way you'll end up in a wheelchair." The cancer story happened to Buñuel and the other line is from my cardiologist. They wanted to operate on Buñuel. That's why *Phantom* was made a year late. They thought he had cancer but they wouldn't tell him. They told me about it, but not Luis. I stayed with that doctor—he's a great surgeon, very famous in Europe—I stayed alone with him till two o'clock that morning, and I wasn't cheerful when I left. You can't imagine. They finally told Buñuel, delicately. So we took these incidents from life and made fun of our doctors—yet in the film, you know, it's symbolic of other things.

It has to do with the incapacity to face death.

Death is present throughout Buñuel's film, as it is throughout his life, as it is for many people. For Buñuel—for many—it's an obsession. Death of course is a reality—and it's a reality in *The Phantom of Liberty.* But I believe there's another theme in *The Phantom,* something worse: confusion. The total confusion of things in the world now. Nearly everything that goes on in the world today . . . I read your thing on the conviction and freeing of the "killer poet" in *Phantom,* the anarchist who's set free at the end of his trial.* Before we made *Phantom* there had been a whole series of criminal attempts, airplane hijackings where the ones who did it were let off scot free. So our film more or less gave an account of this phenomenon.

We decided to make *The Phantom of Liberty* together as the result of a conversation we had between editing and mixing *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie.* We started talking about chance in life, talked about the two of us meeting by chance, and about how many hazards must have combined in life for the two of us to have

*It was Bergamin who thought up the title *The Exterminating Angel* for Buñuel's 1962 film. (R.C.)

**Cineaste* VII, 4. To be precise, the motiveless sniper in *The Phantom of Liberty* is not identified as an "anarchist." (R.C.)

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Anne-Marie Deschott in FANTÔME DE LA LIBERTÉ.

met. And we more or less said, "All right, we'll make a film built around chance."

You know, if we'd made *The Milky Way* after *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* people would have understood it better. I was the only one who laughed when I read the script of *The Milky Way.* It cracked me up. Buñuel was afraid to make the film. He'd say, "Serge, this is completely crazy." I think—we both do—that it's somewhat of a "Discreet Charm of Religion." At any rate *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* has the same kind of craziness in it as *The Milky Way*—some of the characters discuss problems in the same manner and diction the Christians used when they spoke of things they didn't understand at all. Anyhow, I believe *The Milky Way* is a very good film that will endure for a long time. Maybe with time, people will appreciate it. In *The Milky Way* we took whole phrases of dialogue from works on religion . . .

So I read. The published scenario gave examples from Buñuel's working notes.

I purchased a lot of books and we studied them for two or three months, because Buñuel needed to refresh his memory.

The result was an admirable film.

It didn't do well here at all. I'll tell you, one problem for foreign films is that people are still not used to the foreign language. This has been a problem for the major exhibitors of imports. It's sad, it feels like a barrier one can't break—like a ghetto. And I hate ghettoes. I'm the one who got Buñuel out of the ghettoes, to an extent. I put him in the commercial circuit. I think things should be read, or seen, by everyone. If things aren't seen, how can you have an exchange of ideas? I think progress is achieved as in physics: thesis, antithesis, synthesis—followed by more splitting.

You often speak of "spectacle." I find The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie *and* That Obscure Object of Desire *more spectacular than* The Phantom of Liberty.

You're wrong. Perhaps *Phantom* seems a more hermetic film, but it isn't. You know, Luis sometimes complains people find his films cryptic, though he tells his stories very simply. Sometimes he's telling something he's seen happen, something like that. Like the places on the postcards in *Phantom*—the Sacré Coeur had suddenly developed this problem, one tower was cracking. (I don't recall now if we put that item in the film, but we wanted to.) *The Phantom* did very well in France, whereas people considered *The Milky Way* a hermetic film. Of course they did—the film spoke a language they couldn't understand. But what can you do? Luckily everybody doesn't have the same taste. If they did, it'd be a disaster.

The Milky Way *is an intellectual film, but it's a humorous film above all. One needn't know any particular religious history to appreciate it.*

The construction is special—I find it's spectacular from the first. It weaves through the ages, yet not in a straight sequence.

Now the new film, *Obscure Object,* does have a straight narrative line and so people suppose it's a linear film. But it's quite full; at the end one feels its inner fullness. Maybe not everybody feels it, but this dimension is there for those who can. We returned to a more linear construction—yet not really, for this is the first time anyone has cast two actors in the same part with no change from one to the next, no make-up, no Jekyll and Hyde routine. We showed two faces, but we made no changes in the character of Conchita herself.

The only thing we did was to give both actresses the same voice. We selected a voice which would be warm on the one hand and dry on the other, and which could match both players' rhythms. Neither actress could do both by herself; they could do only their own parts.

Both are very good actresses.

Yes. Both were 19 at the time of shooting.

I read somewhere that these two were cast after

the shooting had already started . . .

Started and stopped! We had stopped shooting. I was the one who ordered the film stopped, because Luis would never have asked me to stop production—he always honors his agreements and besides he's utterly generous to a friend. We stopped after two hours' shooting—two hours of real shooting, not counting the first day of shooting in Madrid because that was just warm-up work. You remember the scenes at the station when Mathieu gets off the train and takes a cab —that didn't call for any special acting, it was just a little documentary scene to get started on. Studio shooting started the next day.

We had a little studio set in Madrid. I insisted that the Spanish sets be built in Spain so that they'd be authentic. It's very hard to get a French studio to build realistic Spanish sets. It's like when Americans want to show a Frenchman—they'll just stick a mustache and beret on the actor. So in Madrid, I had a little studio space where the patio set was built. You remember the patio where Mathieu gives Conchita the key and she makes love with her young man. Well, those were the scenes we were scheduled to shoot on that first day of studio work, starting with the easiest, when the locksmith has finished making the key and Mathieu gives Conchita the deed to the property. Maria Schneider was playing Conchita and it was a disaster.

Fernando Rey and Carole Bouquet—THAT OBSCURE OBJECT OF DESIRE

Schneider was not our first choice for the part anyway. There was another actress we wanted, and we didn't get her. (I don't want to say who this was.) And when you're hiring, everybody gets into the act. People had Buñuel and me convinced Maria Schneider was fantastic. But I wouldn't sign with her for eleven weeks. I wouldn't sign, and I went to Seville with Luis.

Luis didn't know Seville, and we went there to be alone for a few days, to absorb the atmosphere of the town. We didn't bring set designers, assistants, or anybody. We just went around Seville on our own, looking for locations by chance. Because these things don't come to you all at once, you know; you have to live a little.

When we were leaving Seville, Luis was a little out of patience and he said, "Serge, we aren't going to get our first choice; let's take Maria Schneider." I let him convince me; it was both our fault. Chiefly my fault too, because if a film is bad you can say it's not the director's fault, it's the producer's—I could have said no. As far as Buñuel was concerned, he had contracted to do this film, and he didn't want to let me down. And I didn't want to let him go, because at 77 he'd be done for, it'd be a disaster. The human factor, so to speak, was secretly present on both sides. So we said okay in Seville, and I came back to Paris and signed Maria Schneider.

You know, I loathe movie stars. I can't stand all that. I especially hate it when the actors start meddling in the roles they're supposed to play. I say it's Luis who makes the films, not the actors . . . Anyway the first day of studio shooting was disastrous, and I realized Schneider wasn't going

◀ *Fernando Rey and Angela Molina in* THAT OBSCURE OBJECT OF DESIRE

to make it at all in the part. Later, we realized she can play passive parts but not active ones. Like on the apartment floor in *The Last Tango* . . . So I told my office, "Look, figure out how much it'll cost me if I stop production."

You see, I never make pictures on advance money. I take the risks 100%. For one thing, international distributors aren't that hot to make a Buñuel film. So I'm obliged to work alone, just as I was obliged to learn other languages because I've lived in so many countries. Perhaps if others believed in my film projects and backed me financially I might have gone ahead on their money. But they never did, so I was never obligated to any backers.

Another thing too, even more important. When you're making a film with somebody who trusts you and whom you respect, you have a certain relationship. Suppose your partner gets the feeling that you're dependent upon some third party, someone else is financing you; then when you get together, say to discuss an idea, he might suspect that what you're saying isn't coming from you but from those who influence you. You know, a grain of sand in an oyster produces a pearl, but in personal relations an irritant isn't always a good thing.

I'd be taking a risk if I gave out the script for backers to read and asked for their opinion. You can be influenced, after all. If I should chance to tell Buñuel there's something in his script I don't understand, at least it's coming from myself. Our relations are such that I can tell him everything.

In any case Buñuel as a film-maker is the fairest, the most scrupulous gentleman there is. Our understanding is always mutual. Buñuel won't force something on you if you don't like it. We have an understanding that if either of us dislikes the script and if we don't agree on how to change it, then we won't do the film; we're both free. Make love, not rape!

I don't think the public realizes that you yourself take very big risks by producing Buñuel's films. I always thought you had a rather sure investment in Buñuel, he has so much prestige by now. I was wondering if you could describe your method of operation as a producer.

I'll tell you. I have a very small organization. My freedom is that I have no big overhead, so I don't have to shoot a picture just to cover my overhead. If your needs aren't great, you're quite free. I think that if film people began to do with less, they'd be freer and they'd make better films. You know, the American producers made great films in the old days, before they sold out. The US used to have terrific producers who risked their necks. Hollywood was built by great men who started small, if you'll recall. Those were Hollywood's good times, extraordinary—it still makes us dream. It was the age of the wild men. There were good ones and bad ones, yet they had talent. But then they created corporations, it all got to be a giant assembly line and the people working there cared only about their paychecks. They want to make money for the corporation so they'll earn more themselves, and it snowballs.

Producing on my own has become a habit with me now, so it gives me a certain freedom. I take a calculated risk, a considered risk. I don't approve of making people work on speculation; if you've hired somebody, you have to pay them. So when I'm making a film, I calculate whether I can bear the cost in case it's a disaster. Also, I'm pessimistic. So I calculate I can afford to lose so much. If I can't afford that amount, if I can't honor my contracts, then I won't make the film. If by chance things go better than I figured, I'll lose less. If things go even better, I can cover my loss. Of course if the film does well, it'll put me in a position to make another.

Releasing a film is even harder than making one; it's like your own child you're sending out into the world. It's painful, especially dealing with businessmen. The businessmen tell you, "My public doesn't care for it"—as if anybody could say "*my* public." There's no such thing.

I'd like to ask you to go back in time to your earliest productions. I'd like to know how you became interested in film.

I'll tell you how. My real profession is mining engineering. I got my degree in 1939. And I got a contract, because my specialty was oil, and an oil company in Iraq was looking for people. So while I was still a student I signed a contract to go to Iraq for five years. And in 1939 just before I graduated the war broke out.

After the war, I didn't want to go back. I had done time in the camps during the war—I spent ten months as a prisoner. I preferred to be free, to live and to be with people I wanted. I earned nothing for a couple of months, just lived. After I got married I started to work seriously. I met people. My wife came from a family of movie people.* Movies got to be a habit, like a drug, like taking up smoking after your first cigarette.

I started as an errand boy. I met a lot of people. In pictures, you have to learn the whole trade. A good production manager has to have been a good first assistant too—he has to know these things. We're all errand boys. I've been everything in the trade. I'd go for coffee if they wanted it on the set. I was a typist. And I worked in editing.

You were how old then?

I was 30 years old at this time, after the war. I was born in 1917; the war was over in '45, and I started in the business in '47. I did various things for the first five years, and started producing only in '52. I started to learn the distribution business too, buying and selling pictures.

I didn't want to remain a businessman. I hate it; it's this horrible pretense where we imagine we're creating something great. But what are we doing? Only making pictures, no more. We try to make our life nicer, no more. We can't change the world. We can only live a little bit and sometimes communicate feelings or ideas, but we shouldn't do it in such a serious way, because it's horrible to be serious—I think.

That's why surrealism was terrific, because it was a revolt against the complete explanation of things. It was a return to romanticism. In fact the basis of surrealism was the romanticism of the 1830s. You may chance to discover there's more to life than eating and drinking, and explaining your every move 100%; there's something surreal in life, and logic and computers can't explain it all, fortunately. Without mystery, there's no more life. There's mystery in everyday life, in love, and in *That Obscure Object of Desire.* The relation between the man and woman, the bombings—try to explain it all! Everybody wants to explain everything. You can't, luckily. And that's why we made the film the way it is.

*Irène Silberman herself recently produced Michel Lang's *A nous les petites Anglaises.* (R.C.)

When we were shooting the last sequence, there was the scene where the lace is taken out of the bag. Luis told me, "Serge, if I put blood on the lace, there'll be critics who'll say Conchita has lost her virginity." I stared at him and said, "No, they couldn't. That's crazy. Where would they see a connection like that?" He went on: "If I *don't* add blood, they'll think I've become a terrible optimist—life is beautiful and it all ends happily ever after." So we put on a *little* blood. (But then the people doing the props put on too much. Later we shot a close-up to take away from the effect a little.)

It is spring, after all, and the music on the radio after the newscast in this scene was the "Song of Spring" from Wagner's *Valkyries.* It's a bit of optimism, romanticism if you like. And then there's the beauty of the lacemaker as she mends the lace, the graceful movement of her hand. And finally comes the bombing.

Sure enough, some critics said Conchita had lost her maidenhood. One young critic called me up: "Serge, it's great! She loses her virginity!" Well, what can you do? People can discover different things in these films—fortunately—because nothing in them is simply right or wrong. You can never say this part is black, the other part is white. Each viewer will be inclined to feel things differently. The most beautiful thing is always doubt. If there isn't ambiguity it's horrible, uninteresting.

But you know, you must be the only producer in the world who believes that.

But you're telling me I'm a producer! I am not a producer. Not at all. No, I'll tell you, I like

"Beautiful ambiguity": the blood on the lace in THAT OBSCURE OBJECT OF DESIRE

people with talent; whenever I meet them, I'm the one who gains. Talking with people who have talent and humor makes life great.

I've been fortunate. I've come across extraordinary people in my life, we've communicated with one another and been pleased with each other's company. The thing is to take life with some fun.

A failure can be good for you, like getting hit on the head. The problem is that defeat is so terrible for us. It's the same with our fear of death. Death is the greatest problem. It haunts our entire life. It haunts certain people especially, perhaps.

About the new film, *Obscure Object.* You know, Luis originally wanted to shoot it in the period of the novel.

When he was first planning it, around 1957?

No, even this time. He told me we can't set a story about a girl protecting her chastity in the present day, now that there's the pill and so on. I pointed out to him that I have two friends. One man is 36 and the other 40—Luis knew who they were, too—and each one had the same thing happen with women friends of theirs. "Life hasn't changed," I said, "it goes on the same way." So we did the film in the present.

You see, nothing is made up in Buñuel's films; everything is borrowed from reality. Luis of course, as you know, always says that the borderline between real and surreal is completely . . . . there is no line. Everything that's real seems surreal, and everything that's surreal seems real. That's true surrealism, and besides, I believe it's also true spectacle.

I was very impressed in That Obscure Object *by the choice of real locations and by the studio sets as well. Fantastic sets! They were even better than in your other productions. Locations and sets both had that quality of the invisible border.*

I'll tell you—Buñuel likes working with me because I do things like the sets in the best way they can be done. I gave him his first opportunity to do things exactly the way he decided to do them. It's better not to do something if you have to approximate. It's better to change your script instead, if you have to, since it all depends on how you write your scene. Once you've made a definite decision, then you have to realize it exactly. The sets were done exactly as intended. We even paid special attention to details, if you looked closely. I was on the sets myself . . . I was all over the place. Buñuel himself has said it: I'm his father, secretary, assistant and collaborator. It's friendship. We have a special relation. I like Buñuel very much, and I believe he's not averse to me.

Can you tell me how you first met Buñuel?

It was by chance—in a way. At that time I was in a partnership, because when I was making *Night Watch* with Jacques Becker I felt I still wasn't experienced enough in film.

You *made* Night Watch?

Yes I did—that was Becker's last film. He died the year after, in 1960. After *Night Watch* I was supposed to make *Diary of a Chambermaid* with Becker as director. We were very close friends. You know, I knocked on Becker's door myself—because nobody wanted to produce *Night Watch.*

But Night Watch *is a wonderful film!*

I'm the one who enabled Becker to do it. I produced one of Jean-Pierre Melville's first films too, before his megalomaniac period—*Bob le Flambeur.* We built the sets ourselves, at night. And I had no money. When I did *Night Watch* with Becker, I took my savings, the result of twelve years' economizing, and I put everything in that film. I was nearly ruined. I won't tell you the whole story. It's too long.

In Paris at that time, I knew an American newspaperman working for *Variety,* Gene Moskowitz, and he used to say, "Serge, why don't you get together with Buñuel? You're always talking about him." I said, "I'd like to, but I'm a little guy, I'm nobody." (This was about sixteen years ago.) "How can I go knock on his door?" You know, I'm definitely timid, like a lot of people. I find it very disagreeable to knock on someone's door, especially if they don't know you. And also, it's a question of manners. It's better to go accompanied by a mutual friend who will introduce you. And the two of you don't just drop in unannounced either. It's a matter of a certain way of living.

Gene said, "Serge, Buñuel's in Europe—he's in Madrid." The next day I took a plane for Madrid, where I knew a Spanish producer. I went to see this producer: "Do you know Buñuel?"

And he answered, "Of course I do!" It wasn't true, but anyway, I asked if he could arrange a meeting, and he said he would. I took a room at a hotel called the Torre de Madrid, which has 32 floors. I was on the 26th floor, room one. A couple of hours later the producer phoned and said, "Buñuel will come see you tomorrow at five." This producer was friends with Fernando Rey, who was making a film with him. And Fernando Rey was friends with Buñuel; he's the one who arranged this. And Buñuel was staying at the same hotel as I was, on the 26th floor, right across the hall in room two! So he came over. I didn't know what he wanted to drink; he prefers a dry martini and all I had was a bottle of whisky. Anyway we finished the whisky at 1:30 in the morning. And he told me he'd like to make a film with me.

He asked me what films I'd made, and I named the latest one: *Night Watch.* He said, "You made *Night Watch?*"—just the way you did —"I loved that film." And I asked him what he'd like to make. He said, "No, you tell me what you'd like to make. If I like one of your suggestions, fine. Just give me some titles." Among my titles was *Diary of a Chambermaid,* seeing I was to have produced it anyway; we agreed on *Diary.*

The next day when I got up I found a little envelope from Buñuel under my door: "Dear sir, I would be pleased if you would join me for dinner this evening." Over that dinner, we became friends. It's funny how much chance brought us together. Luis was born in Aragon and I was born on the border between Prussia and Poland, yet we think alike.

Can I ask you about the making of Diary of a Chambermaid? *One of the significant things about that film (as with* That Obscure Object of Desire *too) is that Buñuel changed the period of the novel. In this case, from 1900 to 1929.*

Yes, although he didn't make any adaptations in it. He took scissors and cut out the pages we would use—that's all. *Diary* was a political pamphlet, as you know. (So is *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie,* after all). On *Diary* I had problems with certain persons, and with the censors. Pre-production problems: they were afraid because characters in the script, fascists, talk about killing the Jews and finally hold a demonstration. And the French authorities told me not to make the film—I should let sleeping dogs lie. So I said to the head of censorship, "Mister Chairman, I have no complexes! Look at the name I carry, and I have no fear. This is not an anti-Semitic film—the people who yell slogans in it are idiots, the film makes that plain. Where were you during the war? I was in Auschwitz. I have no complexes! So if I tell you this isn't an anti-Semitic film, you can rest easy." After the film was finished I also had problems with some viewers. I told them not to worry, I was making fun of myself.

You know, at that time in Europe, in France, there was a terrible current of anti-Semitism in spite of what one heard to the contrary; there was racism, chauvinism. But this is true to some extent in every country; in England the worker is quite racist. So is the French worker, and you have the same thing here in the States. The whole thing is an economic question, isn't it? The other fellow is your rival, competing for your place. That's what it comes down to. It's easy to excite people against other people through racism; it's the easiest way to set them off. Whether it's a religious or a civil authority, they do the same thing so as to be left in peace—they set people against each other.

Did you have pre-production problems in connection with the script's naming Jean Chiappe and therefore alluding to a real person and to a specific period in French history, the current of fascism around 1930?

That is historical; Buñuel had problems with Chiappe, as you know. Chiappe was prefect of the Paris police, and he's the one who banned Buñuel's *L'Age d'Or* in the name of public order. You could say Buñuel's reference to Chiappe at the end of *Diary* is a little bit of personal revenge. But basically it's used as an image. Chiappe himself wasn't chiefly the guilty party, although he got all the blame.

You know, there was a far more serious problem with *L'Age d'Or* at that time. The Viscount de Noailles financed that film; he was the patron of all the surrealists, along with his late wife. When the film was shown, the Vatican threatened the Viscount with excommunication. And the Viscount told this to Buñuel.

Buñuel, you know, was the actual *producer* of

The ambassador and the revolutionary: DISCREET CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE

L'Age d'Or, though the Viscount provided him with the money. And when Buñuel had completed production, he brought the accounts to Noailles and his wife, but the Viscount just took all those papers and threw them in the fire. He didn't want to see them. Yes, he was a great aristocrat in his time. And Buñuel had a tender feeling for him. It was Buñuel who agreed not to exhibit the film. And as you may know, Buñuel recently gave Noailles the negative as a gift. The Viscount is around 85 now. You know, in *That Obscure Object of Desire* there are reminiscences of *L'Age d'Or,* if you recall.

"When I'm very old, will you still love me?" The "documentary" cityscapes, and the explosions that rock the cities, and the powerful magistrate?

Yes, and there are reminiscences of *This Strange Passion* [*El*], *Belle de Jour, The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie.* It contains everything from previous films, all Buñuel's concerns. *The Phantom of Liberty* is in it too, via the terrorism and all that.

Also via the flamenco dance, since there was a dancer in the inn in The Phantom. *I saw other Buñuel films in it too—the jealous man clears his rivals out of the nightclub bodily, as Fernando Soler did in* Daughter of Deceit. *And there's the archetypal scene from* An Andalusian Dog—*the couple witness violence in the street from their window at the height of their own erotic frustration. I'll tell you something personal. Before I saw* Obscure Object *I was all keyed up and I told myself if I saw this film I was going to weep. When I saw it, I didn't weep.*

But the next day you wept.

That night I had a dream, strong memories which some scenes in the film had recalled in me, and I woke up weeping.

During viewing you may simply be laughing at the story, yet the picture grows more important the day after. Buñuel made *That Obscure Object of Desire* with a certain aloofness, with the perspective of one who regards things with some melancholy and a black humor, yet with the greatest possible hope too. It's simple yet full; it has everything.

A friend of mine is a critic who likes Buñuel; he told me, "I felt gooseflesh watching the new film because I'm afraid it might be Buñuel's final work. He's tried to say everything in this one." I'm afraid myself, because Buñuel really did outdo himself. People ask me if I'll produce another one. I'd like to, but I don't know. This one is practically a testament.

Perhaps this will be *my* last picture too, although movies are a habit with me. It's been very hard, having worked with Becker, with Melville in his early days, with Luis. They were people I liked, they were all gentlemen. This film, *That Obscure Object of Desire,* is the fulfilment of a promise which Buñuel made me one year before,

and kept. He is always very respectful of other people, which is why they respect him. And he respects others because he respects himself. Yet he can criticize himself as if he were another individual. In *Obscure Object* he criticizes himself and the society he belongs to. That is the source of Buñuel's humor.

Buñuel is a very complex person. He has terrible extremes. One side of him is very bourgeois; yet he rebels against his own class. He was brought up in a formal manner. He's able to have such a highly moral view of things because he disciplines himself. But you know, I'm not speaking very objectively; my friendship with Buñuel runs too deep for me to be objective about him.

Nobody's objective. History is not objective either. Maybe, thousands of years after the fact, this person's story and that person's ideas emerge objectively. But history is ambiguous, and each person gets something different out of this ambiguity. As soon as things are plain and emphasized, they cease to be true. That's manichaeanism. You know, a film is really political—political and social—when it's doubtful, not when it's manichaean. When Bertolucci in *1900* shows that an aristocrat is impotent and a worker isn't—one is filth and the other is an angel—well, that's ridiculous. Bertolucci is off target creating gross propaganda like that—does he think he's telling his story to some underdeveloped audience? It's just impossible! Stalin himself would have done it better, or at least an Eisenstein or a Gorky—they'd have been subtler! It's a shame, because *1900* contains scenes of a peasant life Bertolucci knows well, which are extremely well done and moving. Then come these naive statements. Once you've demonstrated that a character is a complete fool, then you can't develop anything new. Or that someone is 100% diabolical or divine? No one is. Even God, if God exists, has a diabolic side.

THAT OBSCURE OBJECT OF DESIRE

SERGE SILBERMAN: A Partial Filmography

1952-64: By his own account, Serge Silberman had a role in the production of Jean Pierre Melville's *Bob le flambeur* (1955; production companies: O.G.C. / Studios Jenner / Play Art / La Cyme), Jacques Becker's *Le Trou* (*Night Watch,* 1960; p. c.: Play Art / Filmsonor / Titanus), and other films.

1964: Co-director (assistant general manager) of Ciné-Alliance and Speva. With Michel Safra, produced *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre (Diary of a Chambermaid)*; screenplay by Jean-Claude Carrière; directed by Luis Buñuel; p. c.: Speva / Ciné-Alliance / Filmsonor (France) / Dear Film (Italy).

1966: Founded his own company, Greenwich Film. *Adieu l'ami*; sc.: Sébastien Japrisot; d.: Jean Herman.

1969: *La Voie lactée (The Milky Way);* sc.: Buñuel Carrière; d.: Buñuel; p.c.: Greenwich Film (France) / Fraia Film (Italy).

1970: *Le Passager de la pluie* (Rider on the Rain); sc.: Japrisot; d.: René Clément.

1971: *La Course du lièvre à travers les champs;* sc.: Japrisot; d.: Clément.

1972: *Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie (The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie),* sc.: Buñuel and Carrière; d.: Buñuel.

1974: *Le Fantôme de la liberté (The Phantom of Liberty),* sc.: Buñuel and Carrière; d.; Buñuel.

1975: *Les mal partis;* d.: Jean-Baptiste Rossi.

1977: *Cet obscur object du désir (That Obscure Object of Desire)*; sc.: Buñuel and Carrière; d.: Buñuel; p.c.: Greenwich Film / Galaxie (France) / Incine (Spain).

TANIA MODLESKI

The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas

NOTES ON A FEMININE NARRATIVE FORM

In soap operas, the hermeneutic code predominates: "Will Bill find out that his wife's sister's baby is really his by artificial insemination? Will his wife submit to her sister's blackmail attempts, or will she finally let Bill know the truth? If he discovers the truth, will this lead to another nervous breakdown, causing him to go back to Springfield General where his ex-wife and his illegitimate daughter are both doctors and sworn enemies?" Tune in tomorrow, not in order to find out the answers, but to see what further complications will defer the resolutions and introduce new questions. Thus the narrative, by placing ever more complex obstacles between desire and its fulfillment, makes anticipation of an end an end in itself. Soap operas invest exquisite pleasure in the central condition of a woman's life: waiting—whether for her phone to ring, for the baby to take its nap, or for the family to be reunited shortly after the day's final soap opera has left *its* family still struggling against dissolution.

According to Roland Barthes, the hermeneutic code functions by making "expectation . . . the basic condition for truth: truth, these narratives tell us, is what is *at the end* of expectation. This design implies a return to order, for expectation is a disorder."[2] But, as several critics have observed, soap operas do not end. Consequently, truth for women is seen to lie not "at the end of expectation," but *in* expectation, not in the "return to order," but in (familial) disorder.

As one critic of soap opera remarks, "If . . . as Aristotle so reasonably claimed, drama is the imitation of a human action that has a beginning, a middle, and an end, soap opera belongs to a separate genus that is entirely composed of an indefinitely expandable middle."[2] The importance of this difference between classical drama and soaps cannot be stressed enough. It is not only that successful soap operas do not end, it is also that they cannot end. In *The Complete Soap Opera Book*, an interesting and lively work on the subject, the authors show how a radio serial forced off the air by television tried to wrap up its story.[3] It was an impossible task. Most of the storyline had to be discarded, and only one element could be followed through to its end—an important example of a situation in which what Barthes calls the "discourse's instinct for preservation"[4] has virtually triumphed over authorial control. Furthermore, it is not simply that the story's completion would have taken too long for the amount of time allotted by the producers. More importantly, I believe it would have been impossible to resolve the contradiction between the imperatives of melodrama—i.e., the good must be rewarded and the wicked punished—and the latent message of soaps—i.e., everyone cannot be happy at the same time, no matter how deserving they are. The claims of any two people, especially in love matters, are often simply mutually exclusive.

John Cawelti defines melodrama as having

> at its center the moral fantasy of showing forth the essential "rightness" of the world order. . . . Because of this, melodramas are usually rather complicated in plot and character; instead of identifying with a single protagonist through his line of action, the melodrama typically makes us intersect imaginatively with many lives. Subplots multiply, and the point of view continually shifts in order to involve us in a complex of destinies. Through this complex of characters and plots we see not so much the working of individual fates but the underlying moral process of the world.[5]

It is scarcely an accident that this essentially

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Left: *Alice Horton, the doctor's wife and matriarch in* DAYS OF OUR LIVES *(Frances Reid).* Right: *Tina Clayton and Greg Huddleston (Andrea Evans and Paul Joynt)—two teenagers in* ONE LIFE TO LIVE. *Tina's typical adolescent problems will soon multiply as she becomes an unwilling pan in adult machinations including blackmail and extortion.* [*Photos courtesy NBC and ABC, respectively.*]

The Soap Formula

Currently, twelve soap operas are shown daily, each half an hour or an hour long. The first goes on the air at about 10 a.m., and they run almost continuously until approximately 3:30 p.m. With the exception of **Ryan's Hope,** which takes place in a big city, the soaps are set in small towns and involve two or three families intimately connected with one another. Families are often composed of several generations, and the proliferation of generations is accelerated by the propensity of soap characters to mature at an incredibly rapid rate; thus, the matriarch on **Days of Our Lives,** who looks to be about 65, has managed over the years to become a great-great grandmother. Occasionally, one of the families will be fairly well to do, and another will be somewhat lower on the social scale though still, as a rule, identifiably middle-class. In any case, since there is so much intermingling and intermarrying, class distinctions quickly become hopelessly blurred. Children figure largely in many of the plots, but they don't appear on the screen all that often; nor do the very old. Blacks and other minorities are almost completely excluded.

Women as well as men frequently work outside the home, usually in professions such as law and medicine, and women are generally on a professional par with men. But most of **everyone's** time is spent experiencing and discussing personal and domestic crises. Kathryn Weibel (see note 11) lists "some of the most frequent themes":

the evil woman
the great sacrifice
the winning back of an estranged lover/spouse
marrying her for her money, respectability, etc.
the unwed mother
deceptions about the paternity of children
career vs. housewife
the alcoholic woman (and occasionally man)
(Weibel, p. 56)

Controversial social problems are introduced from time to time: rape was recently an issue on several soap operas and was, for the most part, handled in a sensitive manner. In spite of the fact that soaps contain more references to social problems than do most other forms of mass entertainment, critics tend to fault them heavily for their lack of social realism (on this point, see Edmondson and Rounds [note 3], pps. 228–247). As for the fans, most insist on soap opera's extreme lifelikeness and claim that the characters have to cope with problems very like their own.

nineteenth-century form continues to appeal strongly to women, whereas the classic (male) narrative film is, as Laura Mulvey points out, structured "around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify."[6] Soaps continually insist on the insignificance of the individual life. A viewer might at one moment be asked to identify with a woman finally reunited with her lover, only to have that identification broken in a moment of intensity and attention focused on the sufferings of the woman's rival.

If, as Mulvey claims, the identification of the spectator with "a main male protagonist" results in the spectator's becoming "the representative of power,"[7] the multiple identification which occurs in soap opera results in the spectator's being divested of power. For the spectator is never permitted to identify with a character completing an entire action. Instead of giving us one "powerful ideal ego . . . who can make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator can,"[8] soaps present us with numerous limited egos, each in conflict with one another and continually thwarted in its attempts to "control events" because of inadequate knowledge of other peoples' plans, motivations, and schemes. Sometimes, indeed, the spectator, frustrated by the sense of powerlessness induced by soaps, will, like an interfering mother, try to control events directly:

> Thousands and thousands of letters [from soap fans to actors] give advice, warn the heroine of impending doom, caution the innocent to beware of the nasties ("Can't you see that your brother-in-law is up to no good?"), inform one character of another's doings, or reprimand a character for unseemly behavior.[9]

◀ *Erica Slezak and Lee Patterson in* One Life to Live. [*Photo courtesy ABC.*]

Presumably this intervention is ineffectual, and feminine powerlessness is reinforced on yet another level.

The subject/spectator of soaps, it could be said, is constituted as a sort of ideal mother: a person who possesses greater wisdom than all her children, whose sympathy is large enough to encompass the conflicting claims of her family (she identifies with them all), and who has no demands or claims of her own (she identifies with no one character exclusively). The connection between melodrama and mothers is an old one. Harriet Beecher Stowe, of course, made it explicit in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, believing that if her book could bring its female readers to see the world as one extended family, the world would be vastly improved. But in Stowe's novel, the frequent shifting of perspective identifies the reader with a variety of characters in order ultimately to ally her with the mother/author and with God who, in their higher wisdom and understanding, can make all the hurts of the world go away, thus insuring the "essential 'rightness' of the world order." Soap opera, however, denies the "mother" this extremely flattering illusion of her power. On the one hand, it plays upon the spectator's expectations of the melodramatic form, continually stimulating (by means of the hermeneutic code) the desire for a just conclusion to the story, and, on the other hand, it constantly presents the desire as unrealizable, by showing that conclusions only lead to further tension and suffering. Thus soaps convince women that their highest goal is to see their families united and happy, while consoling them for their inability to bring about familial harmony.

This is reinforced by the image of the good mother on soap operas. In contrast to the manipulating mother who tries to interfere with her children's lives, the good mother must sit helplessly by as her children's lives disintegrate; her advice, which she gives only when asked, is temporarily soothing, but usually ineffectual. Her primary function is to be sympathetic, to tolerate the foibles and errors of others.

It is important to recognize that soap operas serve to affirm the primacy of the family not by presenting an ideal family, but by portraying a family in constant turmoil and appealing to the

spectator to be understanding and tolerant of the many evils which go on within that family. The spectator/mother, identifying with each character in turn, is made to see "the larger picture" and extend her sympathy to both the sinner and the victim. She is thus in a position to forgive most of the crimes against the family: to know all is to forgive all. As a rule, only those issues which can be tolerated and ultimately pardoned are introduced on soaps. The list includes careers for women, abortions, premarital and extramarital sex, alcoholism, divorce, mental and even physical cruelty. An issue like homosexuality which, perhaps, threatens to explode the family structure rather than temporarily disrupt it, is simply ignored. Soaps, contrary to many people's conception of them, are not conservative but liberal, and the mother is the liberal *par excellence.* By constantly presenting her with the many-sidedness of any question, by never reaching a permanent conclusion, soaps undermine her capacity to form unambiguous judgments.

These remarks must be qualified. If soaps refuse to allow us to condemn most characters and actions until all the evidence is in (and of course it never is), there is one character whom we are allowed to hate unreservedly: the villainess,[10] the negative image of the spectator's ideal self. Although much of the suffering on soap operas is presented as unavoidable, the surplus suffering is often the fault of the villainess who tries to "make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator can." The villainess might very possibly be a mother, trying to manipulate her children's lives or ruin their marriages. Or perhaps she is avenging herself on her

The full cast (almost) of NBC's DAYS OF OUR LIVES—
offering possibilities for endless entanglements.

husband's family because it has never fully accepted her.

This character cannot be dismissed as easily as many critics seem to think.[11] The extreme delight viewers apparently take in despising the villainess[12] testifies to the enormous amount of energy involved in the spectator's repression and to her (albeit unconscious) resentment at being constituted as an egoless receptacle for the suffering of others. This aspect of melodrama can be traced back to the middle of the nineteenth century when *Lady Audley's Secret*, a drama about a governess turned bigamist and murderess, became one of the most popular stage melodramas of all time.[13]Discussing the novel upon which the stage drama was based, Elaine Showalter shows how the author, while playing lipservice to conventional notions about the feminine role, managed to appeal to "thwarted female energy":

> The brilliance of *Lady Audley's Secret* is that Braddon makes her would-be murderess the fragile blond angel of domestic realism. . . . The dangerous woman is not the rebel or the blue-stocking, but the "pretty little girl" whose indoctrination in the female role has taught her secrecy and deceitfulness, almost as secondary sex characteristics.[14]

Thus the villainess is able to transform traditional feminine weaknesses into the sources of her strength.

Similarly, on soap operas, the villainess seizes those aspects of a woman's life which normally render her most helpless and tries to turn them into weapons for manipulating other characters. She is, for instance, especially good at manipulating pregnancy, unlike most women, who, as Mary Ellmann wittily points out, tend to feel manipulated by it:

> At the same time, women cannot help observing that conception (their highest virtue, by all reports) simply happens or doesn't. It lacks the style of enterprise. It can be prevented by foresight and device (though success here, as abortion rates show, is exaggerated), but it is accomplished by luck (good or bad). Purpose often seems, if anything, a deterrent. A devious business benefitting by indirection, by pretending not to care, as though the self must trick the body. In the regrettable conception, the body instead tricks the self—much as it does in illness or death.[15]

In contrast to the numerous women on soap operas who are either trying unsuccessfully to become pregnant or have become pregnant as a consequence of a single unguarded moment in their lives, the villainess manages, for a time at least, to make pregnancy work for her. She gives it "the style of enterprise." If she decides she wants to marry a man, she will take advantage of him one night when he is feeling especially vulnerable and seduce him. And if she doesn't achieve the hoped-for pregnancy, undaunted, she simply lies about being pregnant. The villainess thus reverses male/female roles: anxiety about conception is transferred to the male. He is the one who had better watch his step and curb any promiscuous desires or he will find himself saddled with an unwanted child.

Moreover, the villainess, far from allowing her children to rule her life, often uses them in order to further her own selfish ambitions. One of her typical ploys is to threaten the father or the woman possessing custody of the child with the deprivation of that child. She is the opposite of the woman at home, who at first is forced to have her children constantly with her, and later is forced to let them go—for a time on a daily recurring basis and then permanently. The villainess enacts for the spectator a kind of reverse *fort-da* game,[16] in which the mother is the one who attempts to send the child away and bring it back at will, striving to overcome feminine passivity in the process of the child's appearance and loss. Into the bargain, she also tries to manipulate the man's disappearance and return by keeping the fate of his child always hanging in the balance. And again, male and female roles tend to get reversed: the male suffers the typically feminine anxiety over the threatened absence of his children.

The villainess thus continually works to make the most out of events which render other characters totally helpless. Literal paralysis turns out, for one villainess, to be an active blessing, since it prevents her husband from carrying out his plans to leave her; when she gets back the use of her legs, therefore, she doesn't tell anyone. And even death doesn't stop another villainess from wreaking havoc; she returns to haunt her husband and convince him to try to kill his new wife.

The popularity of the villainess would seem to be explained in part by the theory of repetition compulsion, which Freud saw as resulting from the individual's attempt to become an active manipulator of her/his own powerlessness.[17] The spectator, it might be thought, continually tunes

in to soap operas to watch the villainess as she tries to gain control over her feminine passivity, thereby acting out the spectator's fantasies of power. Of course, most formula stories (like the Western) appeal to the spectator/reader's compulsion to repeat: the spectator constantly returns to the same story in order to identify with the main character and achieve, temporarily, the illusion of mastery denied him in real life. But soap operas refuse the spectator even this temporary illusion of mastery. The villainess's painstaking attempts to turn her powerlessness to her own advantage are always thwarted just when victory seems most assured, and she must begin her machinations all over again. Moreover, the spectator does not comfortably identify with the villainess. Since the spectator despises the villainess as the negative image of her ideal self, she not only watches the villainess act out her own hidden wishes, but simultaneously sides with the forces conspiring against fulfillment of those wishes. As a result of this "internal contestation," the spectator comes to enjoy repetition for its own sake and takes her adequate pleasure in the building up and tearing down of the plot. In this way, perhaps, soaps help reconcile her to the meaningless, repetitive nature of much of her life and work within the home.

Soap operas, then, while constituting the spectator as a "good mother" provide in the person of the villainess an outlet for feminine anger: in particular, as we have seen, the spectator has the satisfaction of seeing men suffer the same anxieties and guilt that women usually experience and seeing them receive similar kinds of punishment for their transgressions. But that anger is neutralized at every moment in that it is the special object of the spectator's hatred. The spectator, encouraged to sympathize with almost everyone, can vent her frustration on the one character who refuses to accept her own powerlessness, who is unashamedly self-seeking. Woman's anger is directed at woman's anger, and an eternal cycle is created.

And yet . . . if the villainess never succeeds, if, in accordance with the spectator's conflicting desires, she is doomed to eternal repetition, then she obviously never permanently fails either. When, as occasionally happens, a villainess

Relaxing with husband number three, Delia Reid Ryan Ryan Coleridge (Randall Edwards) ponders her next manipulative move while Roger (Ron Hale) wonders how to cope with her, in RYAN'S HOPE. [*Photo courtesy NBC.*]

reforms, a new one immediately supplants her. Generally, however, a popular villainess will remain true to her character for most or all of the soap opera's duration. And if the villainess constantly suffers because she is always foiled, we should remember that she suffers no more than the good characters, who don't even try to interfere with their fates. Again, this may be contrasted to the usual imperatives of melodrama, which demands an ending to justify the suffering of the good and punish the wicked. While soap operas thrive, they present a continual reminder that woman's anger is alive, if not exactly well.

We must therefore view with ambivalence the fact that soap operas never come to a full conclusion. One critic, Dennis Porter, who is interested in narrative structures and ideology, completely condemns soap operas for their failure to resolve all problems:

> Unlike all traditionally end-oriented fiction and drama, soap opera offers process without progression, not a climax and a resolution, but mini-climaxes and provisional denouements that must never be presented in such a way as to eclipse the suspense experienced for associated plot lines. Thus soap opera is the drama of perepetia without anagnorisis. It deals forever in reversals but never portrays the irreversible change which traditionally marks the passage out of ignorance into true knowledge. For actors and audience alike, no action ever stands revealed in the terrible light of its consequences.[18]

These are strange words indeed, coming from one who purports to be analyzing the ideology of narrative form! They are a perfect illustration of

how a high-art bias, an eagerness to demonstrate the utter worthlessness of "low" art, can lead us to make claims for high art which we would ordinarily be wary of professing. Terms like "progression," "climax," "resolution," "irreversible change," "true knowledge," and "consequences" are certainly tied to an ideology; they are "linked to classical metaphysics," as Barthes observes. "The hermeneutic narrative, in which truth predicates an incomplete subject, based on expectation and desire for its imminent closure, is . . . linked to the kerygmatic civilization of meaning and truth, appeal and fulfillment."[19] To criticize classical narrative because, for example, it is based on a suspect notion of progress and then criticize soap opera because it *isn't* will never get us anywhere—certainly not "out of ignorance into true knowledge." A different approach is needed.

This approach might also help us to formulate strategies for developing a feminist art. Claire Johnston has suggested that such a strategy should embrace "both the notion of films as a political tool and film as entertainment":

> For too long these have been regarded as two opposing poles with little common ground. In order to counter our objectification in the cinema, our collective fantasies must be released: women's cinema must embody the working through of desire: such an objective demands the use of the entertainment film. Ideas derived from the entertainment film, then, should inform the political film, and political ideas should inform the entertainment cinema: a two-way process.[20]

Clearly, women find soap operas eminently entertaining, and an analysis of the pleasure that soaps afford can provide clues not only about how feminists can challenge this pleasure, but also how they can incorporate it. For, outrageous as this assertion may at first appear, I would suggest that soap operas are not altogether at odds with a possible feminist aesthetics.

"Deep in the very nature of soaps is the implied promise that they will last forever."[21] This being the case, a great deal of interest necessarily becomes focused upon those events which retard or impede the flow of the narrative. The importance of interruptions on soap operas cannot be overemphasized. A single five-minute sequence on a soap opera will contain numerous interruptions both from within and without the diegesis. To give an example from a recent soap opera: a woman tries to reach her lover by telephone one last time before she elopes with someone else. The call is intercepted by the man's current wife. Meanwhile, he prepares to leave the house to prevent the elopement, but his ex-wife chooses that moment to say she has something crucial to tell him about their son. Immediately there is a cut to another couple embroiled in an entirely different set of problems. The man speaks in an ominous tone: "Don't you think it's time you told me what's going on?" Cut to a commercial. When we return, the woman responds to the man's question in an evasive manner. And so it goes.

There's trouble ahead for newlyweds Seneca Beaulac (John Gabriel) and Jill Coleridge (Nancy Addison), who are both "hard-working achievers," in RYAN'S HOPE *[NBC].*

If, on the one hand, these constant interruptions and deflections provide consolation for the housewife's sense of missed opportunities, by illustrating for her the enormous difficulty of geting from desire to fulfillment, on the other hand, the notion of what Porter contemptuously calls "process without progression" is one endorsed by many innovative women artists. In praising

Nathalie Sarraute, for example, Mary Ellmann observes that she is not

> interested in the explicit speed of which the novel is capable, only in the nuances which must tend to delay it. In her own discussions of the novel, Nathalie Sarraute is entirely antiprogressive. In criticizing ordinary dialogue, she dislikes its haste: there not being "time" for the person to consider a remark's ramifications, his having to speak and to listen frugally, his having to rush ahead toward his object—which is of course "to order his own conduct."[22]

Soap opera is similarly antiprogressive. Just as Sarraute's work is opposed to the traditional novel form, soap opera is opposed to the classic (male) film narrative, which, with maximum action and minimum, always pertinent dialogue, speeds its way to the restoration of order.

In soaps, the important thing is that there always be time for a person to consider a remark's ramifications, time for people to speak and listen lavishly. Actions and climaxes are only of secondary importance. I may be accused of wilfully misrepresenting soaps. Certainly they appear to contain a ludicrous number of climaxes and actions: people are always getting blackmailed, having major operations, dying, conducting extramarital affairs, being kidnapped, going mad, and losing their memories. The list goes on and on. But just as in real life (one constantly hears it said) it takes a wedding or a funeral to reunite scattered families, so soap opera catastrophes provide convenient occasions for people to come together, confront one another, and explore intense emotions. Thus in direct contrast to the male narrative film, in which the climax functions to resolve difficulties, the "mini-climaxes" of soap opera function to introduce difficulties and to complicate rather than simplify characters' lives.*

Furthermore, as with much women's narrative (such as the fiction of Ivy Compton-Burnett, who strongly influenced Sarraute), dialogue in soap operas is an enormously tricky business. Again, I must take issue with Porter, who says, "Language here is of a kind that takes itself for granted and assumes it is always possible to mean no more and no less than what one intends."[23] More accurately, in soaps the gap between what is intended and what is actually spoken is often very wide. Secrets better left buried may be blurted out in moments of intensity, or they are withheld just when a character most desires to tell all. This is very different from nighttime television programs and classic Hollywood films with their particularly

◀ *Gerald Anthony and Judith Light face another unresolvable issue in* ONE LIFE TO LIVE. [*Photo courtesy ABC.*]

*In a provocative review of *Scenes from a Marriage*, Marsha Kinder points out the parallels between Bergman's work and soap operas. She speculates that the "open-ended, slow paced, multi-climaxed structure" of soap operas is "in tune with patterns of female sexuality" and thus perhaps lends itself more readily than other forms to the portrayal of feminine growth and developing self-awareness (*Film Quarterly*, [Winter 1974–75], p. 51). It would be interesting to consider Kinder's observation in the light of other works utilizing the soap opera format. Many segments of *Upstairs Downstairs*, for instance, were written by extremely creative and interesting women (Fay Weldon, for one). The only disagreement I have with Kinder is over her contention that "The primary distinction between *Scenes from a Marriage* and soap opera is the way it affects us emotionally. . . . Instead of leading us to forget about our own lives and to get caught up vicariously in the intrigues of others, it throws us back on our own experience" (p. 53). But soap opera viewers constantly claim that their favorite shows lead them to reflect upon their own problems and relationships. Psychologists, recognizing the tendency of viewers to make comparisons between screen life and real life, have begun to use soap operas in therapy sessions (see Dan Wakefield, *All Her Children* [Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1976], pp. 140–43). We may not like what soap operas have to teach us about our lives, but that they *do* teach and encourage self-reflection appears indisputable.

naive belief in the beneficence of communication. The full revelation of a secret on these shows usually begins or proclaims the restoration of order. Marcus Welby can then get his patient to agree to treatment; Perry Mason can exonerate the innocent and punish the guilty. The necessity of confession, the means through which, according to Michel Foucault, we gladly submit to power,[24] is wholeheartedly endorsed. In soap operas, on the other hand, the effects of confession are often ambiguous, providing relief for some of the characters and dreadful complications for others. Moreover, it is remarkable how seldom in soaps a character can talk another into changing his/her ways. Ordinarily, it takes a major disaster to bring about self-awareness—whereas all Marcus Welby has to do is give his stop-feeling-sorry-for-yourself speech and the character undergoes a drastic personality change. Perhaps more than men, women in our society are aware of the pleasures of language—though less sanguine about its potential as an instrument of power.

An analysis of soap operas reveals that "narrative pleasure" can mean very different things to men and women. This is an important point. Too often feminist criticism implies that there is only one kind of pleasure to be derived from narrative and that it is essentially a masculine one. Hence, it is further implied, feminist artists must first of all challenge this pleasure and then out of nothing begin to construct a feminist aesthetics and a feminist form. This is a mistaken position, in my view, for it keeps us constantly in an adversary role, always on the defensive, always, as it were, complaining about the family but never leaving home. Feminist artists *don't* have to start from nothing; rather, they can look for ways to rechannel and make explicit the criticisms of masculine power and masculine pleasure implied in the narrative form of soap operas.

One further point: feminists must also seek ways, as Johnston puts it, of releasing "our collective fantasies." To the dismay of many feminist critics, the most powerful fantasy embodied in soap operas appears to be the fantasy of a fully self-sufficient family. Carol Lopate complains:

> Daytime television . . . promises that the family can be everything, if only one is willing to stay inside it. For the woman confined to her house, daytime television fills out the empty spaces of the long day when she is home alone, channels her fantasies toward love and family dramas, and promises her that the life she is in can fulfill her needs. But it does not call to her attention her aloneness and isolation, and it does not suggest to her that it is precisely in her solitude that she has a possibility for gaining a self.[25]

This statement merits close consideration. It implies that the family in soap operas is a mirror-image of the viewer's own family. But for most viewers, this is definitely not the case. What the spectator is looking at and perhaps longing for is a kind of *extended* family, the direct opposite of her own isolated nuclear family. Most soap operas follow the lives of several generations of a large family, all living in the same town and all intimately involved in one another's lives. The fantasy here is truly a "collective fantasy"—a fantasy of community, but put in terms with which the viewer can be comfortable. Lopate is wrong, I believe, to end her peroration with a call for feminine solitude. For too long women have had too much solitude and, quite rightly, they resent it. In a thought-provoking essay on the family, Barbara Easton persuasively argues the insufficiency of feminist attacks on the family:

> With the geographical mobility and breakdown of communities of the twentieth century, women's support networks outside the family have weakened, and they are likely to turn to their husbands for intimacy that earlier generations would have found elsewhere.[26]

If women are abandoned to solitude by feminists eager to undermine this last support network, they are apt to turn to the right. People like Anita Bryant and Mirabel Morgan, says Easton, "feed on fears of social isolation that have a basis in reality."[27] So do soap operas.

For it is crucial to recognize that soap opera allays *real* anxieties, satisfies *real* needs and desires, even while it may distort them.[28] The fantasy of community is not only a real desire (as opposed to the "false" ones mass culture is always accused of trumping up), it is a salutary one. As feminists, we have a responsibility to devise ways of meeting these needs that are more creative, honest, and interesting than the ones mass culture has come up with. Otherwise, the search for tomorrow threatens to go on, endlessly.

In Days of Our Lives, *Marlena and Don (Deidre Hall and Jed Allan—at right) marry only after several postponements. Many complications will ensue, since the bridal party includes the bride's twin sister . . .* [*Photo courtesy NBC.*]

NOTES

1. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Richard Miller, trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 76.
2. Dennis Porter, "Soap Time: Thoughts on a Commodity Art Form," *College English* (April 1977), p. 783.
3. Madeleine Edmondson and David Rounds, *From Mary Noble to Mary Hartman: The Complete Soap Opera Book* (New York: Stein And Day, 1976), pps. 104-110.
4. Barthes, p. 135.
5. John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), pps. 45-46.
6. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Women and the Cinema*, Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary, eds. (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977), p. 420.
7. Mulvey, p. 420.
8. Mulvey, p. 420.
9. Edmondson and Rounds, p. 193.
10. There are still villains in soap operas, but their numbers have declined considerably since radio days—to the point where they are no longer indispensable to the formula. *The Young and the Restless*, for example, does without them.
11. See, for example, Kathryn Weibel, *Mirror Mirror: Images of Women Reflected in Popular Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1977), p. 62. According to Weibel, we quite simply "deplore" the victimizers and totally identify with the victims.
12. "A soap opera without a bitch is a soap opera that doesn't get watched. The more hateful the bitch the better. Erica of 'All My Children' is a classic. If you want to hear some hairy rap, just listen to a bunch of women discussing Erica.

'Girl, that Erica needs her tail whipped.'

'I wish she'd try to steal my man and plant some marijuana in my purse. I'd be mopping up the street with her new hairdo.' " Bebe Moore Campbell, "Hooked on Soaps," *Essence* (November 1978), p. 103.
13. "The author, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, belonged to the class of writers called by Charles Reade 'obstacles to domestic industry.' " Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1967), p. 204.
14. Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 165.
15. Mary Ellmann, *Thinking About Women* (New York: Harvest Books, 1968), p. 181.
16. The game, observed by Freud, in which the child plays "disappearance and return" with a wooden reel tied to a string. "What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skilfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive 'o-o-o-o.' [Freud speculates that this represents the German word *'fort'* or 'gone.'] He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearing with a joyful *'da'* ['there']." According to Freud, "Throwing away the object so that it was 'gone' might satisfy an impulse of the child's, which was suppressed in his actual life, to revenge himself on his mother for going away from him. In that case it would have a defiant meaning: 'All right, then go away! I don't need you. I'm sending you away myself.' " Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, James Strachey, trans. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), pps. 10-11.
17. Speaking of the child's *fort-da* game, Freud notes, "At the outset he was in a *passive* situation—he was overpowered by experience; but by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an *active* part. These efforts might be put down to an instinct for mastery that was acting independently of whether the memory was in itself pleasurable or not." Freud, p. 10.
18. Porter, pps. 783-784.
19. Barthes, p. 76.
20. Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema" in *Movies and Methods*, Bill Nichols, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 217.
21. Edmondson and Rounds, p. 112.
22. Ellmann, pps. 222-223.
23. Porter, p. 788.
24. Michel Foucault, *La Volunté de Savoir* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1976), esp. pps. 78-84.
25. Carol Lopate, "Daytime Television: You'll Never Want to Leave Home," *Radical America* (January-February 1977), p. 51.
26. Barbara Easton, "Feminism and the Contemporary Family," *Socialist Review* (May-June 1978), p. 30.
27. Easton, p. 34.
28. A point Hans Magnus Enzensberger makes about mass consumption in general. See *The Consciousness Industry* (New York: Continuum Books, 1974), p. 110.

WILLIAM F. VAN WERT

The Cinema of Marguerite Duras: Sound and Voice in a Closed Room

Marguerite Duras has pioneered what she calls the "multiple work of art," a text which is simultaneously a novel, a play, a dance, a film, an opera. Duras has broken the "rules," the long-standing codes which separated the various art forms, in order to provide a bridge from one to the other. Such was the case for her highly acclaimed *India Song* (1976), which premiered as a film and as a play at the same time, while Gallimard published the work in "novel" form.[1] Duras's sense of the multiple work of art stems from her growing disillusionment with writing and reading as obsolete forms. She writes, she says, from compulsion, maintaining a love-hate relationship with phrases, reading very little herself, acknowledging that others don't read anymore. The solution seems to be a mass art form, a form which blends into each medium, an answer to mass reproduction, a multiproductive text. That text often operates as a cross between ritual and play, between sleep-walking and future-fantasy, with an aesthetic that could appropriately be termed creative destruction:

> Some modern ideas in art have destruction as the keynote. Make your art object; tear it to pieces; and make something new out of the pieces. Too often we have been so frightened by destruction and violence that we have not been able to see the essential function of demolition in creative rebuilding.[2]

Duras has expressed the same thought, in terms of conventions, from a negative framework: "What is habitual is what is worn-out."[3]

Her rejuvenating sense of the multiproductive text has been at the root of the apparently anti-cinematic narratives of her recent films. From *Détruire dit-elle (Destroy She Said,* 1969) to *La Femme du Gange (Woman of the Ganges,* 1972), from *Nathalie Granger* (1974) to *India Song* (1976), Duras has refined her cinematic form, gradually eliminating concrete references for symbolic ones, restricting the camera's movement and the editor's arbitrary eclipse-cuts for long, repetitive takes and for fixed frames that are both boring and fascinating, flattened out and trance-inducing. Her narrative, then, operates within a neutralized comic strip and acting gives way to complex sound-image relationships: the "voices" are freed of their speakers, sometimes functioning as pure sounds. Bouncing off the figurative walls of the closed-room frame, sound and voice move in a dialectic between meditation and interview. The dialectic culminates in *Le Camion* (1978), her most recent film, a metafilm, in which Duras herself encircles the camera as both director and protagonist.

Such formal concerns are usually associated with the most self-conscious of the experimental films in this country, not with commercially viable feature films. That Duras has incorporated this formalism successfully within a narrative tradition is largely a testament to the strength of feminist film criticism and Lacanian film criticism in France, both of which have championed Duras's films in recent years. But what of the primary film viewing experience? Why are her films so difficult, so boring, yet so important and so rewarding? I first came to Duras as film-maker from having read *Moderato Cantabile* and having admired the written texts for *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and *Une aussi longue absence* (1961). But the repetitive poetry of her novels and of those two films was missing in *Destroy She Said.* I "taught" the film to an undergraduate class, and those who hadn't fallen asleep reported that it was the most boring film they had ever watched. At the time, I assumed the blame and thought that I would need to do a couple more "preparatory" lectures before I taught the film again. Having taught her films for

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five more years, I now see that they are a learning experience through confrontation, not through pleasure and identification. Duras is a committed artist who disdains works of art and who has minimal confidence in the impact of an art work upon an audience: thus, her formalism. And for someone who is a novelist with a poet's ear for music, she is incredibly silent. Unlike *Hiroshima mon amour* and *Une aussi longue absence*, Duras's own films contain no poetic camera movements nor do they fill up the static camera shots with interesting or beautiful spoken text. Her films have forced me to confront film as a potential *non-seeing* process, one in which split-screen is replaced by split sound tracks. And as her visual sense becomes more assured, more *pro forma* or perfunctory, Duras's experiments in sound become more audacious, more subtle and, yes, more formal. Her experiments in language have precisely to do with separating the visual track from the sound track and with breaking down the sound track into autonomous parts of music or spoken text—as audible statement, as memory recall, or simply as the whisperings of longing and desire. I know now that I cannot expect my students to derive immediate pleasure from a Duras film. I also know that from such a confrontation my students have been more readily receptive to the usages of sound in the films of Resnais, Godard or Robert Altman. Accordingly, I think Duras's films deserve a closer look, one by one.

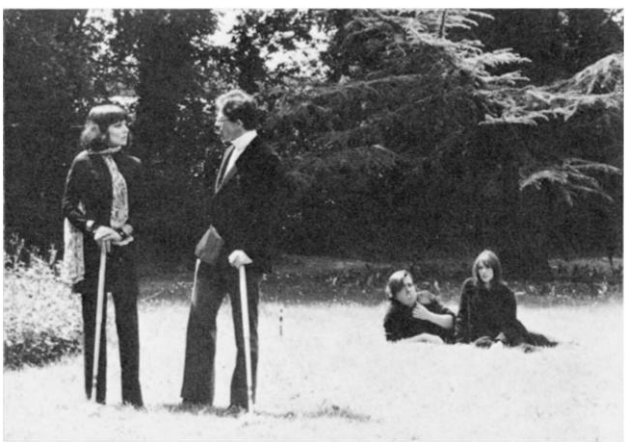
One of the major metaphors linking the visuals with the sounds and voices in *Détruire* is that of reading and writing, the dialectic between the two: characters about to become writers, characters unable to start reading. Max Thor asks Stein: "Are you a writer?" Stein answers: "I'm about to become one." Max Thor and Stein watch Elizabeth Alione. Max Thor says: "She's been reading the same novel for a week. She must have started, forgotten . . . started again." Cut from that comment to night and Max Thor asks Stein: "In the dead of night here, to whom can one write?" Stein reads Max Thor's letter to Elizabeth Alione. Max Thor tells Alissa that he begins a novel every night but that he can't write. Stein reads Max Thor's note to Alissa. She tears it up. Elizabeth Alione finally admits: "I don't like to read." Max Thor: "Why pretend? Nobody reads." Elizabeth: "When one's alone . . . to save face." She offers him the novel. Max Thor: "No. You have to throw books away." And in the confrontation with Elizabeth Alione's husband, he asks them: "Why are you interested in her?" Stein: "For literary reasons." Husband: "Is she a character in a novel?" Stein: "A remarkable one." Husband, to Max Thor: "Are you the writer?" Max Thor: "No." Nobody reads in the film, and the only writing is the beginning of the note from Max Thor to Elizabeth Alione, which Stein reads to Alissa. Elizabeth Alione never reads it. The "destroy" that Alissa pronounces has to do with literacy first of all: reading literacy, writing literacy, visual literacy. And, because the "voices" of the four people don't usually say what they are really intending to say, because those voices are often interchangeable, because the voices are chanted in recitative fashion with a precise and measured diction (especially Michel Lonsdale's Stein character), they become the new reading and writing. They suggest the embryonic first formulations of a future dialogue, although at present that dialogue remains richly but rigidly codified: all characters combine in twos, except Stein and Elizabeth Alione, who never confront each other; characters visually present in the frame discuss the characters who are absent; the visualization of two characters present within a frame is often "sabotaged" by off-sound of the two other characters, producing the few cuts in the film.

DESTROY, SHE SAID

And, even in those instances when characters seem to be talking with each other, the conversation is "betrayed" by their gazes and by a sub-

jective play of pronouns. For example, Alissa and Elizabeth Alione finally confront each other in a mirror. It is one of the few times in the film that they look at each other. The irony here is that they have need of reflections in order to face each other; their bodies are not physically facing one another. And as they address each other, they look off in different directions, so that what one says about the other, in that measured chant, is as easily said about oneself: simple dialogue becomes interior monologue. In another instance, Stein joins Alissa inside. He says: "I don't know you, Alissa, you're a part of me." Alissa: "You can't talk to me, can you?" Stein: "No." Alissa: "It's the first time he and I can't talk with each other." They do not look at each other as they say their lines. The suggestion in their mono-dialogue is that Stein, the seer of the future, must often borrow the words of Max Thor. He refers to Max Thor elsewhere as "he" when he really means "I" in talking to Alissa. And she in turn moves from the "you" to the "he," reminiscent of the pronoun-disguise of the Japanese lover in *Hiroshima mon amour*, in which he assumes the pronoun and identity of the dead German lover in order to unlock Riva's past and install himself in that memory.

Much of the passion of the people is suggested in the spoken text but never shown on-screen. Alissa tells Stein that Max Thor leaves the window open for Stein to watch them making love. Stein and Alissa go off into the forest to make love. Within the visual frame, there is only the suggestion of passion and the denial of it. Stein says of the open window: "One morning they'll find the two of you—shapeless, clotted like tar." The sense of decay he evokes reminds one of the last image of Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1930), with the lovers buried in the sand, or of de Chirico's masked and misshapen lovers in "Hector and Andromache." Even the passion must be destroyed if that passion is restrictive. The counter to Stein's statement is Alissa's corrective statement to Elizabeth Alione: "If you had loved someone once, you would have loved all the others."



◀ DESTROY, SHE SAID

Duras's structure seems often to "deaden" what is visually present in the frame to evoke what is visually absent but present on the sound track. In one of the first meetings between Elizabeth and Alissa, they begin a conversation which, just as it looks as though it might lead somewhere, is "muted" and replaced by a conversation between Max Thor and Stein on the sound track. Yet the camera holds on the two women. The switch in speakers is not used as an immediate cutting device, as in most other films. In *Destroy She Said* the switch in speakers on the fluid sound track denotes a remove in point of view. The effect is that of the tennis game: there are never any tennis players in the film, but often the sound of tennis balls. The image is deadened, the sound track is animated. In a similar fashion, the effect in the switch of speakers is that of an objective presentation of a scene (Alissa and Elizabeth talking), giving way to a subjective point-of-view presentation of the same scene (the camera stays on them, the sound switches to Max Thor and Stein). Finally, the removed voices cease being voices of an independent conversation to become commentary voices upon the first conversation: Elizabeth Alione tells Alissa about her difficult pregnancy. Max Thor: "The void is what she's looking at." Stein: "Yes, but in the right manner." Their comments are followed by the sounds of tennis balls, a kind of sound-transition between the four voices. The sound track returns to Alissa and Elizabeth, as though they had once again regained possession of their images. Alissa: "Did you want the baby much?" Elizabeth: "My husband did." The sound of tennis balls stops. The point here is that Duras not only uses found sounds as symbols (the tennis balls, the forest, the cry of birds, the music and thunder), but also as an integrated "voice" in the narrative. The sound of the tennis balls is "timed" to stop in reaction to Elizabeth Alione's response.

The double remove works visually in the film, but it is usually expressed verbally. The camera maintains a minimum of movements and cuts. The minimalist film frame accumulates a trance-boredom not unlike that in Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1966–7), while the sounds and voices impose layer upon layer of meaning to the unchanged visual. Alissa recites, as though she were reading the lines from somewhere off-screen. She tells Max Thor that she sees him watching Elizabeth Alione sleeping. The original watching, the original voyeurism, is rephrased by Alissa into a double voyeurism with mutual consent. Nothing is psychologically hidden between these three wandering Jews. Everything is visually hidden from the spectator.

And, as a form of punctuation, the sound of tennis balls begins again as they sit down to play cards. The camera holds on Elizabeth Alione at the card table, but reveals the cards of the other three. The point of the ritualized game is not the game itself, for the three tell Elizabeth that they don't know how to play (only after they've played quite awhile). The camera maintains a rigidity of a cartoon box, a minimalist frame with no signification whatsoever possible. Yet the image is "read" by the voices, the sounds and the structural placement of the players. The punctuation of the tennis-ball sound is a reminder that this game is no more real, no more played by the rules, than the tennis game or the croquet game. The voices of the three surrounding Elizabeth constitute a series of *non sequiturs*. And the placement of the players assumes importance only when the spectator realizes, along with Elizabeth, that the game is a nonsense game. Elizabeth sits across from Stein and is flanked by Alissa (between her and Stein) and Max Thor. Both Alissa and Max Thor are potential lovers for Elizabeth. Stein sits opposite because he is the counter to Elizabeth: just as she is the one the others wish to engage, he is the one who never engages. Just as she is the most "real" character in the film, he is the most mythical.

In such extremely long takes with such static frames, the unattentive viewer goes to sleep or leaves the film. The attentive viewer looks at the directional gazes of the characters, the pauses in their speeches, the gestures of the eyes and hands and the music or found sound or other characters' speeches on the sound track. Ironically, the camera immobility, in conjunction with the free play of sound and voices, creates an intensified *viewing* experience, often approximating through point of view and reaction shots the complete destruction of the shot/reaction shot (with synch sound) format traditionally used for conversations in film. For instance, when Elizabeth Alione leaves, goes outside to throw up, the camera subtly takes her place at the table and fixes on the husband. The voices of the other three must be "heard" against this visual of the husband and his stupefied looks. When Elizabeth comes back, her return constitutes a real "event" in the film, for the camera must move to make room for her. Likewise, the mobile camera moves over the empty park, while the characters are still inside, as though they were not allowed that mobility. And, while they discuss the sounds of guns or thunder from the approaching forest, the camera remains on them. The refusal to go to the sounds is underscored by the falling light and Duras's portrait of the three in shadows, with Alissa's enigmatic comment: "It's music to the name of Stein." Stein and Max Thor, both men with monosyllabic names from Germany and the Norse Gods, and shadows bathing the characters, as in the "twilights of the Gods"—all this symbolism can only be suggested, for it is never explained in the film. The film ends on the three of them, fixed and immobile, coming to closure on a tableau, a still photograph. And that final freeze, however, suggests an expansion of time in the freeze-frame of space, as Roland Barthes has pointed out:

> When we look at a still photograph, we do not see a presence "being there" for this definition is too loose and can be applied to any copy—but a presence that "has been there." We therefore have a new category of space-time: place present but time past—so that in still photography there is an illogical conjunction of here and then . . .[4]

With *Woman of the Ganges* Duras breaks completely with convention: specifically, the image-sound relationship, whereby we always look to the visuals and "trust" them, while not always hearing or saving the sound, even deliberately losing the sound, mistrusting the sound. Duras gives birth to two womens' voices, with the

following caveat: *Woman of the Ganges* is really two films: one of the images, one of voices. The voices do not belong to the two women in the images, who know nothing of those unseen voices. With that caveat, Duras proceeds with her most visually austere film, a film of static shots and seemingly overdue cuts, with little fluidity or continuity between shots, except in their long duration or in their repetition. In this way, she forces the spectator to "look" to the voices. She even confuses the issue more by having the voices refer to the characters in a vague and generic way instead of using their proper names (Lol V. Stein, Anne-Marie Stretter, Michael Richardson). These characters are designated as "the man on the beach," "the woman in black," "the man from India" and "the woman of the Ganges." They move like zombies through the frame, while Duras's camera holds on the empty spaces they leave. Their "story," their entire existence as characters, is dependent upon the voices, who remember the story as they go along, reproducing the same voice level and emotions (fear, anguish, longing, desire, etc.) as would be expected from an event happening for the first time (but not a memory).[5]

The voices must explain what would otherwise be enigmatic gesturing in the frame. First voice: "Have they lost their memories? Yes, their memories are outside them now." The accompanying visual is of Anne-Marie Stretter and two men looking up at the hotel without seeming to notice the wandering Lol V. Stein, who is presumed physically dead by all other characters, but who "survives" both in their fixated memories and in her own desire and longing. She survives visually but has no speech. The beggar women of India, equally mythical and more patently political, survive on the sound track but are never shown on the screen. In another instance, the voices hum, an approximation of memory itself, to a visual of footprints diverging on the beach.

These womens' voices not only tell the story of the past that the visuals refuse to show, they also "lose" the story and become pure emotions. The first voice is fascinated by the story of the characters in the frame. The second voice is fascinated by the first voice. Sometimes, their speeches refer both to the characters within the narrative and to each other, especially when there is a physical change in the voices: abrupt pauses or silences, whispering or lyrical whining, chanting or screaming.

Thus, the voices arrange both the time frames and the continuity in the narrative. The voices begin a reconstruction of the ball in S. Thala; the narration is as though for a flashback, but there is no corresponding cut or difference whatsoever in the visuals. The same, unchanged "present" visuals become the "past." Duras's use of repeated visuals enhances the easy slippages between time frames: walking down the corridor, looking up at the hotel from outside, walking on the beach. Duras even allows an ironic protest on the part of the visuals. There is what appears to be an explanatory insert in the film, as though the camera wished to show what the voices had not stated: a woman writes a letter, and in one of the few close-ups in the film, we see the letter. It reads: "S Thala. Oct. 9. Don't regret anything. I will stay in S Thala forever and ever." Duras is here using a film convention to destroy it. The letter in *Casablanca* or the newspaper headlines in *Citizen Kane* are clear examples of *explanatory* inserts. The letter in *Woman of the Ganges*, written by a dead woman, explains nothing. Far from explaining anything, the insert actually poses new problems for the narrative and is, thus, an enigmatic insert, a stumbling block, a trap.[6]

And yet there are visual codes which allow for meanings in the frame that are not explained by the voices. For example, we see a blue photograph of Lol V. Stein. Later, there is a blue shot of the evening (the hotel, the beach). Finally, there is a blue shot of nothing, empty air. The progression sets up a symbolic path for the mechanism of memory, from the visual reminder to the objects and surroundings of that memory to the void and absence of anything tied to the memory. But the apparent order in the imagery is contradicted by the found objects and sounds which operate as triggers of the past or as debris in the present: the empty tennis courts, the abandoned bicycle of Anne-Marie Stretter, the spilled flowers, the piano tune, the sound of birds, the repeated and invading sounds of the ocean. The sound of the piano, operating at what seems to be an anarchistic level, comes when it will to haunt the charac-

ters with its incomplete reprises suggesting fragments of memory. At the same time, the visuals on the checkerboard floor or the empty beach suggest only absence and abandonment. There is, then, in this dialectic between the image and the sound, a forgetting in the present (as the film progresses) as a consequence of the remembering of the past.

But finally, there emerges a fixed narrative structure to the film, perceptible only in the final sequences. The constant movement on the beach contrasts with the immobility inside the hotel. And progressively, the characters' voices usurp the voices of the sound track, even though the two women in the film never speak to each other. Thus, silence, when it comes late in the film, signifies shock or remembrance of death and abandonment for the characters within the frame rather than a pause in the commentary of the voices without bodies. And finally, the characters' voices are also usurped by the memory-triggers which will survive the memory: the piano tune and the sound of ocean waves.

With *Nathalie Granger* Duras returned to a common setting in France. And if *Woman of the Ganges* is her least accessible film, then *Nathalie Granger* is her most accessible. The irony here is that the easy access is a trap of no exit, in the Sartrian sense. Minus the richly textured voices of *Woman of the Ganges, Nathalie Granger* plays out in a closed room with little or no distraction or interference from the outside world. The husband in the film leaves after the first sequence. The children are also gone. Two mothers go from room to room with nothing to do. There are two "interventions" in their entrapment: the first comes from the radio and news of a kidnapping involving, one suspects, their children. The other intervention is the visit by the door-to-door salesman who tries to sell them a new brand of washing machine. He increases his efforts and his desperation as it becomes clear to him that, not only are they not interested, but they aren't even listening. They look at him, they ask him questions that have nothing to do with his product, but they don't listen to him. The poignancy of the film derives from this stylized hard-sell that ends in his shrinking ego and loss of identity, for it is the only moment of *potential* communication in the film, other than Nathalie's love-hate relationship with the piano.

Duras returns with *India Song* to the plot and setting of *Woman of the Ganges,* but with more action in the frame, more cutting (very few long takes) and a more directly political relationship between Anne-Marie Stretter (who was brought to the Far East as a new bride at the age of eighteen and subsequently spent time in almost every consulate in the Far East) and the beggar woman (who was sold at the age of eighteen and has been wandering ever since). Duras still operates with a minimalist frame, a closed room format, but the technique is both more richly codified and more visually interesting than in *Woman of the Ganges.* For example, she has qualified both the camera and the objects photographed by the camera: "In this film I decided to use the *plan américain* (medium shot), because close-ups pull people into the story. Everything is badly framed and badly shown. Deliberately."[7] The visual compensation for this framing and camera set-up comes in the lush color contrasts and the symbolic contrasts between objects, especially those between the ruins outdoors and the mirror indoors. Duras has stated that the mirror moments are the only moments in the film that constitute "present" time, while all else, and especially the shots of the ruins, constitutes the "past." And the rectangular shape of the mirror calls into doubt even the "present" of the images and reflected images. And yet the mirror sequences are fascinating both in terms of doubled time and reflected point of view. For example, Anne-Marie dances with the young attaché at one point, while

NATHALIE GRANGER ▶

the Vice-Consul and Michael Richardson converse off-screen. But, because the mirror is directly behind the dancing couple, they are doubled at every turn. Everything is reflected, as it was then, as it is now. And the "wall" that reflects everything also suggests that the filming camera is but another mirror, itself. In another sequence later in the film, Anne-Marie dances with the young attaché in the left-foreground and center of the frame. Point of view and voyeurism come through to the spectator, even though they cannot be appreciated by characters within the film, for on the right of the frame, Michael Richardson is reflected in the mirror, watching the dancing couple and smoking a cigarette. Duras's use of the mirror "levels" into one visual plane two distinct spatial points, so that Richardson's reflection seems to be standing right behind the dancing couple.

But, as with her other films, what makes *India Song* such a masterful film is Duras's complex and innovative use of sound. The two voices of *Woman of the Ganges* return for the first half of *India Song*, but are gradually succeeded by two other voices, one of which (a male voice) is fascinated by the fiction at hand and asks the other (the voice of Duras) to help him remember, and her voice, while providing the details, also fears for the safety of the "partner" voice. As with *Woman of the Ganges*, these voices are anonymous and the characters within the frame are supposedly unaware of them. For example, Michael Richardson fondles the partially naked body of Anne-Marie Stretter. Duras's notation for the scene is as follows: "The hand of Michael Richardson—the lover—stops fondling her body at precisely that moment (the moment when the second voice declares: "I love you with an absolute desire."), as though this last phrase of the second voice caused him to stop."[8] Conversely, these womens' voices slow down and follow the rhythm of the lover's hand, and their monotone breaks into a lyrical chant.

There is an even more direct relationship between the voices and the voices of the characters within the visual frame. As the film progresses, those characters' voices become like the soundtrack voices. Duras's notations demand a strict adherence to code:

> The diction, in general, will be of an extreme precision. It should never appear completely natural. A slight defect ought to be practiced and perfected during rehearsals: it will be common to all the voices. One should have the feeling of a reading, but carried-over, that is: already played-out. This is what we call: "the interior reading voice." Remember that, on-screen, absolutely no word will be spoken.[9]

Within the film frame, then, silence reigns, while characters figuring in the frame are surrounded by sound, fragments of sentences off-camera: the sounds that build up the illusion of the bodies of other people, the sounds that build up the sense of the past within the present. These off-camera sounds also serve to emphasize the songs of the beggar woman and the tune on the piano. Thus, this "interior reading monologue" of voices serves both a narrative and political function.

But there are numerous other sound-image relationships besides the voices-to-voices relationships. There are contrapuntal relationships between sounds: "The chant of Savannakhet stops with the sounds of gunfire, as though the chant of Savannakhet, itself, had been fired upon."[10] There are relationships between sound and light: "In an inverse movement that is rigorously symmetrical at the same time, the light increases to the intensity it had before the sounds of gunfire made it diminish."[11] Another example of the sound-light relationship is even more political: the 14th of Beethoven elicits the light from the crematorium where the bodies of those who have died of hunger are being burned. There are relationships between the visual object and its sonorous symbolism: "The void is around everything, bottomless and without end. It's a sound: the ocean."[12] In this instance, the sound makes meaningful the enigmatic shots of the ocean, as though the image and its sound-equivalent were two separate things.

Finally, Duras has arranged all these sounds in an order, one coming after the other, machine-gun fashion, all competing for the spectator's attention, all competing with the images.

> The sound elements come one after the other, for example, in the following order:
> (1) the wind
> (2) sound of the ocean
> (3) sirens

(4) screeching of birds
(5) dancing[13]

Even in the sound designated as "dancing," there is progression with meaning, from the blues to the tango to the fox trot. The film's final sound-image contrast, though, is perhaps Duras's most striking example of the possibilities in her new forms. For the first time, the reprise of "India Song" is not played to dancing nor even to the fictional characters who never resolve their past. Instead, it is played to the wanderings of the beggar woman. The woman is still unseen, so she remains more idea than character, more myth than fixed (and finite) reality. The camera travels along a map of her wanderings, but in reverse, retracing her steps, to show how she got to be the Woman of the Ganges. More active than at any other time in the film, the camera moves in close-up from Calcutta to Rangoon, down by Bangkok, and ending on the Mekong, ironic and nonfictional allusion to the trauma of Vietnam.

With a film frame so compressed, with actors moving as though they were statues and reciting as though they were reading from an old hymnal, and with the proliferation of unidentified voices and the plethora of symbolic sounds on the sound track, the wonder is that Marguerite Duras has been able to continue making films and acquire any following at all. One thing is certain: her recent successes will not induce a lapse into formula. It seems a safe prediction that she will expand the possibilities of sound in film even further.

NATHALIE GRANGER

NOTES

1. The beginnings of her concept of the multiple work of art are, of course, in her apprenticeship with Alain Resnais and the emphasis he and other film-makers of the "literary" New Wave (Robbe-Grillet, Jean Cayrol, Chris Marker, Agnes Varda) placed on the published text of a film, so that the text was meant to be read as well as viewed.
2. Brian and Shirley Sutton-Smith, *How to Play With Your Children* (New York: Hawthorn, 1974), p. 93.
3. "Entretien avec Marguerite Duras," *Cinéma 75*, No. 200 (July-August 1975), p. 103.
4. Christian Metz, *Film Language: Semiotics of the Cinema*, tr. by Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 5.
5. Duras's films pose enormous problems for the critic. The split in *Woman of the Ganges* between the film of the images and the film of the voices is very difficult to render adequately in "linear" criticism. One interesting approach to the film is Barbara Halpern Martineau's split criticism (reflecting the split of the film) in "Woman of the Ganges," *Jump Cut*, No. 5 (January-February 1975), pp. 13-15.
6. The enigmatic insert has by and large replaced the explanatory insert in many modern films and especially in the films of Godard and Robbe-Grillet.
7. Duras offered these comments after the première of *India Song* at the New York Film Festival in 1976.
8. Marguerite Duras, *India Song* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 39.
9. *India Song*, p. 58.
10. *India Song*, p. 28.
11. *India Song*, p. 29.
12. *India Song*, p. 139.
13. *India Song*, p. 124.

LUCY FISCHER

The Lady Vanishes:

WOMEN, MAGIC AND THE MOVIES[1]

"Woman is the other, she is all man aspires to be and does not become . . . Therefore he endows woman with her nature; the Other—opposition whom he can touch, conquer, possess, take comfort from, be inspired by, and yet not have to contend with. She is mystery."

—Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

In October and November of 1896, Star Film Company's first year of production, Georges Méliès shot a film entitled *The Vanishing Lady*, which is credited as displaying the director's first use of a cinematic "substitution trick."[2] The "plot" of the film is simple: a lady, in full Victorian garb, is seated in a chair, against the background of an ornate, elaborately-molded wall. A magician (played by Méliès) drapes her body with a fabric cover. When the cloth is removed, the lady has disappeared, and much to our horror, in her place is a skeleton.

Though the occurrence portrayed is, of course, extraordinary, there is nothing exceptional about the film. It is one of hundreds of such magic films that Méliès produced between the years of 1896 and 1912, films that were imitated by Pathé in France and by Edison in the United States.

It is, in fact, precisely the *commonplace* quality of the film that is at issue—its status as a cinematic archetype, or even cliché. By 1896 the trick film paradigm had been established: such works would involve a *male* magician performing acts of wonder upon a *female* subject. To make a lady vanish was, after all, Méliès's first idea for a substitution trick. In subsequent films he would elaborate upon this basic situation. Thus, in *Apparitions Fugitives* (1904) Méliès would levitate a female subject and in *Extraordinary Illusions* (1903) reconstitute her out of a mannequin's parts. In *L'Enchanteur Alcofrisbas* (1903) Méliès would conjure women out of flames and in *Extraordinary Illusions* turn them into men. From film to film the superficial persona of the male magician figure would tend to vary—from the traditional nineteenth-century stage magician in *Ten Ladies in an Umbrella* (1903) to the Roman god in *Jupiter's Thunderbolts* (1903)—but his function would remain the same: to perform feats of wonder upon a female subject.

Though we are all accustomed to crediting Méliès with the birth of film magic, the implications of that genre for the *image of women* have not been examined. In addition to being the "father" of film fantasy, Méliès may also have to stand as the inadvertent patriarch of a particular cinematic vision of women.

In all fairness to Méliès, however, his personal role in authoring such a vision is highly qualified. For, as we know, many of the screen creations associated with Méliès are, in truth, derived from the antecedent tradition of theatrical magic. Méliès, himself, was a stage magician; prior to making films he had purchased the Théâtre Robert-Houdin in 1888. Thus it is to the legacy of theatrical magic that we must turn to find the roots of this cinematic image of woman—a vision which Méliès and others eventually "grafted" onto the screen.

When one begins to examine the history of stage magic, one finds that the situation of male magician and female subject—so common to the trick film genre—is simply a convention borrowed from theatrical magic. In the course of an entire book on the history of stage magic (*The Magic Catalogue* by William Doerflinger) only two examples of female magicians were ever cited.[3] One involved a woman named Adelaid Herrman, who originally served as magician's assistant to her husband Alexander, and then assumed his role when he died. The other reference was to Dorothy Dietrich and Celeste Evans, a team of magicians

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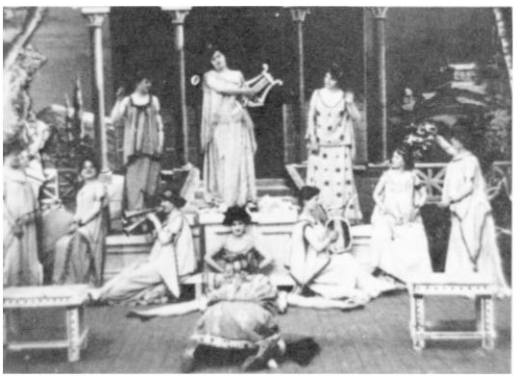


Top: *Méliès's* THE VANISHING LADY (1896): *the cinema's first "substitution trick."* Top left: PIERROT'S PROBLEM *(Biograph 1902).* Bottom left: *Méliès's* TEN LADIES IN AN UMBRELLA. [*All photos in this article courtesy The Museum of Modern Art and The Library of Congress. Most of the films discussed here will soon be available, on a single reel, from the Circulation Department, MOMA.*]

specializing in "dove illusions." Clearly, this text does not constitute a definitive study of stage magic, and one would assume that other female magicians have, indeed, existed and performed. But the paucity of references to women magicians at least makes clear the exceptional nature of that status, and the tenacity with which the model of male magician and female subject is maintained.

It is precisely the dominance and immutability of that paradigm that makes one begin to suspect that sexual role-playing is *itself* at issue in the rhetoric of magic, and that perhaps in performing his tricks upon the female subject, the male magician is not simply accomplishing acts of prestidigitation, but is also articulating a discourse on attitudes toward women.

In approaching the phenomenon of theatrical and cinematic magic in this fashion I am making certain assumptions. Like Roland Barthes in his studies of boxing and striptease in *Mythologies,* I will assume that the conventions of magic are not simply arbitrary, incomprehensible actions, but rather elements in a coherent social "sign system" that can be read for its cultural meaning.[4] The notion, however, that the significance of magic involves a submerged discourse on sexual politics, is a speculation—a working hypothesis that must be tested through an examination of magical practice.

To begin that investigation, let us return to the basic archetype of male magician working wonders upon the female subject, and commence to read it for its implications. Perhaps the act most typical of trick films is that of simply *conjuring* a woman. In Edison's *Mystic Swing* (1900) a series of women are made to appear on a moving trapeze; in Biograph's *Pierrot's Problem* (1902) a clown-magician produces two girls from behind his voluminous pantaloons. In *Ten Ladies in an Umbrella,* Méliès makes women appear and disappear with the help of an unlikely prop; in *The Ballet Master's Dream* (1903) a sleeper conjures women as part of an oneiric fantasy.

Accustomed as we are to this particular magical trope, it is easy to accept it as a mere "given" of the rhetoric of magic, and therefore to neglect to pursue its implications. But if we regard it as meaningful and begin to consider its significance, various issues come into focus.

On the most obvious level, the act of the male magician conjuring women is simply a demonstration of his *power over the female sex.* Woman has no existence independent of the male magi-

cian; he can make her appear when he wants her and disappear when (to paraphrase de Beauvoir), he wishes no longer "to contend" with her. Woman is thus a *function* of male will.

In the rhetoric of magic the conjured woman is also a *decorative object*—to be placed here and there like a throw pillow or a piece of sculpture. Thus, in countless trick films (like *Jupiter's Thunderbolts*) women appear in tableaux "arrangements"—like dried flowers or fruit.

On another level, the act of conjuring and "vanishing" ladies tends to *dematerialize* and *decorporealize* the female sex—to relegate woman to the level of "spirit." Thus, to paraphrase de Beauvoir again, magical practice literalizes the notion of woman as "Other," as unfathomable "mystery."

Often, however, in these trick films, woman's immaterial status takes on a particular inflection. Rather than function simply as a spirit, she is cast specifically as a *figment of the male imagination.* This notion is most apparent in the trick films involving the magician as dreamer. In Méliés's *The Clockmaker's Dream* (1904), for example, the main character falls asleep and has an oneiric fantasy of a bevy of women who emerge from a grandfather clock. Similarly, in *The Ballet Master's Dream* (Méliès/1903) a man dreams about a series of dancing women. In these films the narrative openly situates the women within the male imagination, and casts them as sexual fantasies. In other films their status as sexual fantasy is less literal and explicit, yet why else would Méliés bother to conjure so many ladies from an umbrella?

Thus far, however, our inquiry has only scratched the surface and has viewed the act of conjuring women as a flexing of the male sense of power over the passive, ethereal female sex. But from another viewpoint, the male's need to exert his power can be seen as belying the *opposite* impulse: rather than evince his sense of strength in relation to women, might it not bespeak his perception of relative weakness? In other words, the gentleman doth protest too much. If our male magician is so sure of his own power over woman, why must he so relentlessly subject us to repeated demonstrations of his capability?

It is in response to that question that I must advance another speculation. Might it be that in addition to demonstrating the male sense of power over the female, the practice of magic also evinces certain deep-seated male anxieties concerning the *female's power over him*? According to this reading the male magician is not so much attempting to demonstrate his potency over the female, as he is to *defuse or exorcise her potency over him.* What aspects of magical practice might corroborate such a reading? And, furthermore, what psychological and cultural evidence is there to support such a notion of male "anxieties" regarding women?

As a starting point for the investigation of these questions, it is useful to examine the reverse situation of the magic "paradigm"—that is, the model of a female magician performing tricks upon the male. As mentioned earlier, in the history of theatrical magic such female magicians are rare, and their occurrence is no more common in the archives of cinematic magic. Several films of this kind do exist, however, and their portrayal of the female magician is most telling.[5]

There is, for example, a marvelous film of 1905 made by Edison entitled *A Pipe Dream,* which opens with a medium close-up of a woman smoking a cigarette, seated against a black background. She begins rather playfully to blow smoke into her outstretched hand, and, out of nowhere, a tiny man appears, on bended knees, upon her palm. The little homunculus seems to be pleading with the woman, as though asking for her hand in marriage. She laughs at him cruelly, and begins to close her palm; her homunculus disappears. Perplexed, she tries again to conjure her little man, but cannot repeat the trick.

What is interesting about this film is its characterization of the female "magician"—one fraught with anxiety and ambivalence toward woman. Unlike the camera set-up for most magic films, that of *A Pipe Dream* renders the scale of the woman huge, particularly in comparison to her diminutive little man. She is a literalization of the overpowering female, the Amazon, or the awesome, domineering Mother, as seen by a child-man. Thus, she is a figure of considerable terror. Psychologists might have something to say about her as well, particularly about how her

depiction evinces certain classic male fears concerning women. In her article, "The Dread of Woman" (1932), for example, Karen Horney speaks of the psychic importance of the male child's anxieties regarding his mother, and Horney's language seems custom-made for the film. She discusses the young boy's perception that his genital is "much too small for his mother's" and how he "reacts with the dread of his own inadequacy, of being rejected and derided." Such, of course, is the fate of our homunculus.

The film has other implications as well. The fact that the woman smokes a cigarette marks her, according to Victorian mores, as dangerously loose and "masculine," and thus invests her magician-status with a degree of perversity. Furthermore, it is significant that when she tries to repeat her trick, she fails, as though her magical powers were accidental, or beyond her control.

Another film of the period, *The Red Spectre* (Pathé/1907) is interesting to examine in this regard as well. The narrative of this film involves a competition between a male magician (dressed as a devil, in skeleton costume) and a female conjurer (dressed in courtly attire). Ultimately, the woman magician reduces the male to a folded costume, and appropriates his black cape. Again, a certain anxiety regarding the figure of the female magician is apparent, particularly her perceived ability to get the better of the male.

In point of fact, throughout the history of myth and religious practice, when women have been "granted" magical powers by men, those powers have most often been regarded as evil or dangerous. We rarely find an image of a harmless female magician, playfully conjuring people and objects. Rather, she is cast as a figure of great perversity. According to Greek legend, for example, the magical Circe turned the companions of Ulysses into pigs and wild beasts; and in Venezuelan mythology, the love-goddess, Maria Leonza, turned men into stone.[6] Similarly, the legendary Sirens were bird-women who played magical music on their lyres and lured sailors to a watery grave. Even in contemporary mythos, the tainted figure of the prostitute is said to turn "tricks" upon her "johns." Thus, in all of these cases, women who practice magic seem to do so at the expense of men.

A PIPE DREAM *(Edison 1905).*

In terms of the history of the Christian religion, the most compelling female "magician" is, significantly, the witch—clearly a figure of great terror. Though male witches, or *incubi,* were thought to exist, the notion of witchcraft was strongly identified with the female of the species, or *succubi.* That perverse magical powers were associated with womanhood in particular is apparent in the *Malleus Maleficarum,* a handbook on witchcraft written by two Dominican monks in 1484. According to that influential text: "Perfidy is more found in women than in men . . . since they are feebler in body and in mind, it is not surprising they should come under the spell of witchcraft."[7] Furthermore, woman "is more carnal than man as is clear from her many carnal abominations." Thus all witchcraft is seen to stem from "the carnal lust which in women is insatiable."[8]

What these few examples demonstrate is the flip side of the male magician/female subject paradigm. In the cases where women magicians exist, they are figures of awe and dread. This makes clear the fact that woman is not always perceived as *powerless*—a passive prop. Rather woman's power is often acknowledged, but it is viewed as perilous and perverse. Perhaps, the male magician is not only performing tricks upon the female; he is preventing *her* from performing more dangerous tricks upon *him.*

Thus the rhetoric of magic may bespeak a *fear* of the female, rather than the exuberant display of male superiority that marks its surface. The male magician's obsessive need to "dematerialize"

women by making them vanish, may in fact, betray his fear of female "carnality," as much as it displays his own sense of power.

But what precisely are the nature of these male fears, and what cultural/psychological evidence is there to support their existence? First of all, several texts have been written on the subject: *The Fear of Women* by psychoanalyst Wolfgang Lederer, and *The Dangerous Sex* by H.R. Hays.[9] Furthermore, various psychologists have produced essays on the topic, like Gregory Zilboorg's "Masculine and Feminine . . ." Karen Horney's "The Dread of Woman," and Freida Fromm-Reichmann and Virginia Gunst's "On The Denial of Women's Sexual Pleasure."[10] Freud himself spoke of male anxieties toward women in *Totem and Taboo.*[11]

In most interpretations, this fear of woman centers on the female genital. According to Freud, in his essay "Medusa's Head," the female genital posits the threat of male castration and is thus viewed with terror.[12] In other remarks in *Totem and Taboo* Freud questions whether the male fear of woman might not stem from a fear of being "weakened" by her, as he is in the sexual act.[13] In much of the writing on the subject mythology has served as cultural evidence. Myths, for example, provide the suggestion that men may also fear women's procreative powers because they perceive them as entailing the reverse power of *death.* Freida Fromm-Reichmann and Virginia Gunst cite the following Persian myth of creation as proof of such an anxiety:

> In that myth a woman creates the world, and she creates it by the act of natural creativity which is hers and which cannot be duplicated by men. She gives birth to a great number of sons. The sons, greatly puzzled by this act which they cannot duplicate become frightened. They think: "Who can tell us, that *if she can give life, she cannot also take life.*" And so, because of their fear of this *mysterious ability of woman,* and of its *reversible* possibility, they kill her (Italics mine).[14]

Thus, once more woman's sexuality is linked to mutilation or death: if woman can conceive life, can she not also take it away? If the womb is a bearer of life, might it not also be a tomb?

This irrational fear of female "magic" is apparent in many of the trick films. In *The Red Spectre* it seems significant that the woman magician manages to kill the *male* devil, reducing him to a disembodied skeleton. In several other films, women are associated with death and skeletal symbolism. In Méliès's *The Vanishing Lady,* for example, when the woman disappears she is replaced by a skeleton, an occurrence which also happens in Edison's *The Mystic Swing.* Perhaps this fear of women explains why so many magic films involve tricks in which women are turned into men, thereby annihilating their disturbing sexual status. In *A Delusion* (Biograph/1902) a female model turns into a man each time the photographer looks into the camera lens. In *The Artist's Dilemma* (Edison/1901) a woman turns into a clown.

Given this basic fear of imagined female powers, it is not surprising to find the iconography of theatrical and cinematic magic plagued by a rampant *hostility* toward the female subject. In fact, it is this very aggression that makes the theory of male fear more plausible. If the male magician only wished to "play" with the female subject, why has he devised for her such a chamber of horrors?

For instance, in many trick films women are symbolically dismembered. In Biograph's *A Mystic Reincarnation* (1902) a male magician conjures female body parts, then turns them into a woman. In *Extraordinary Illusions* (1903) Méliès takes out mannequin limbs from a "magical box" and through stop-motion photography transforms them into a flesh and blood woman.

In other films (like *Apparitions Fugitives* (1904), *L'Enchanteur Alcofrisbas* and *The Red Spectre*) women are levitated, an action which likens them to corpses in advanced states of *rigor mortis.* In such a posture they also impersonate the model Victorian wife—whose sexuality was entirely dormant. According to H. R. Hays, women of the era engaged in intercourse "in a sort of coma, apparently pretending that nothing was happening [since] the slightest sign of life on [their] part would have been a humiliating admission of depravity."[15]

In the canon of theatrical magic tricks, of grandiose "stage illusions," we find a catalogue of magical misogony. Thus we have such tricks as "Rod Through Body" in which a sword is placed through a woman's torso, "Dagger Chest" in which a series of knives are placed into a box around a woman's head, "Shooting a Woman

Out of a Canon," "Sawing a Woman in Half," "Shooting Through a Woman," and finally "The Electric Chair."[16] Such tricks cannot simply be viewed as jovial and naive demonstrations of imagined male powers, as a harmless flexing of the masculine ego. Rather they must be regarded as symbolic acts of considerable violence.

But certainly not *all* of magical practice involves a thinly disguised hostility toward women. What about such trifles as pulling rabbits from hats, or flowers from cones? Though it is true that such tricks do not suggest male aggression toward women, they can, nonetheless, be seen as constituting a submerged discourse on male-female relations. For when one begins to examine those sleights-of-hand so characteristic of magic tradition, one is struck by how so many of them center on the theme of *creation:* men pulling rabbits out of hats, making flowers grow from canes, bringing mechanical automata "to life." All of these acts seem like symbolic representations of *birth,* and their occurrence at the hand of the *male* magician seems to bespeak an envy of what is, essentially, the *female procreative function.* Significantly, most of these magical births take place with the aid of a highly phallic object—a "mystic" cone, or a cane, or perhaps an "enchanted candle."

Since my proposed reading of these tricks presumes a notion of male envy of the female procreative function, it would be well to examine that subject before proceeding any further. In the canons of psychoanalytic literature, we are, of course, more familiar with a theory of the *reverse* situation, of the female's alleged envy of the male. According to Freud in his formulation of "penis envy," during a young girl's "phallic phase" (3–7 years), she sees a naked man and realizes that she "lacks" a penis. As Freud would have it the psychological consequences of the young girl's perception are devastating and far-reaching: "She develops, like a scar, a sense of inferiority . . . she begins to share the contempt felt by men for a sex which is the lesser in so important a respect . . . Even after penis-envy has abandoned its true object, it continues to exist . . . in the character trait of jealousy."[17] Thus in traditional psychoanalytic theory it is the female who is seen as biologically deficient and envious of the male.

Early on in the history of psychology, voices were raised in protest against Freud's construal of sexual relations. And many of those who countered his claims did so by advancing an opposing notion of the male envy of the female for her procreative, life-giving powers. Thus, writing in 1926, Karen Horney states:

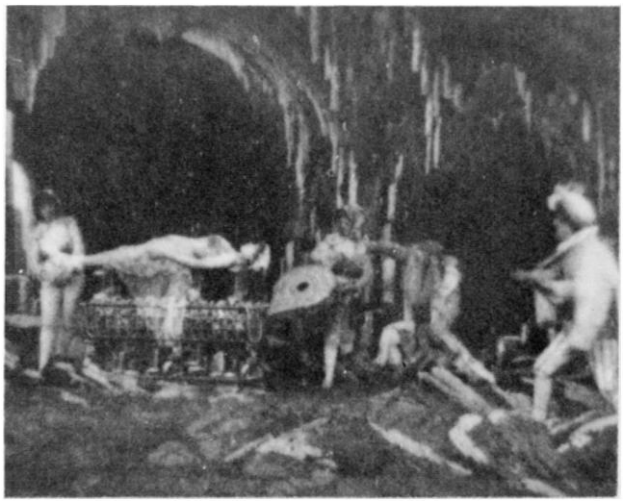
> . . . from the biological point of view woman has in motherhood, or in the capacity for motherhood, a quite physiological superiority. This is most clearly reflected in the unconscious of the male psyche in the boy's intense envy of motherhood . . . When one begins . . . to analyze men . . . one receives a most surprising impression of the intensity of this envy of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood, as well as of the breasts, and of the act of suckling.[18]

Similarly psychoanalysts Fromm-Reichman and Gunst state:

> Men are not only unconsciously afraid of women as childbearers but many men are also envious of this ability of women . . . We know it from our clinical practice . . . We hear so much about penis envy but it is not fashionable in a patriarchal culture to talk about birth envy, although many of us know it exists.[19]

In discussing the issue of male envy, many psychoanalysts have felt the need to venture into the field of anthropology. Thus in 1944 psychoanalyst Gregory Zilboorg wrote an essay, "Masculine and Feminine," in which he posited male envy as a determining force in the creation of primitive culture:

> . . . the male who first overcame the woman by means of rape was hostile and murderous toward the female . . . But despite all his economic and sadistic and phallic superiority, man could not fail to discover that woman . . . still possessed a unique power over mankind. She could produce



LES APPARITIONS FUGITIVES *(1904): Levitation.* ▶

children . . . Thus man, who hated the woman-mother, must have envied her too . . .[20]

Zilboorg's assertions are clearly hypothetical, but many practicing anthropologists have documented concrete evidence of the male envy of the female. Margaret Mead, for example, in a chapter on "Womb-Envying Patterns" in *Male and Female* demonstrates how male initiation rituals of South Sea island societies evince anxieties that are suppressed in Western society:

> In our Occidental view of life, woman, fashioned from man's rib, can at most strive unsuccessfully to imitate man's superior powers and higher vocations. The basic theme of the initiatory cult, however, is that women, by virtue of their ability to make children, hold the secrets of life. Men's role is uncertain, undefined and perhaps unnecessary. By a great effort man has hit upon a method of compensating himself for his basic inferiority. Equipped with various mysterious noise-making instruments . . . they can get the male children away from the women, brand them as incomplete and themselves turn boys into men. Women, it is true, make human beings, but only men can make men.[21]

Thus, Mead casts male initiatory rites as elaborate, compensatory "magic tricks."

Another researcher in the field of male envy is Bruno Bettelheim who, in his book *Symbolic Wounds*, describes the primitive ritual of *couvade*, by which the husband of a parturient woman enacts a rite in which he mimics, and even appropriates, the child-bearing act:

> The [pregnant] woman works as usual up until a few hours before birth; she goes to the forest with some women, and there the birth takes place. In a few hours she is up and at work . . . as soon as the child is born the father takes to his hammock and abstains from work, from all food but weak gruel . . . and is nursed and cared for by all the women of the place. This goes on for days, sometimes weeks.[22]

What these various quotes from psychologists and anthropologists demonstrate is that there exists a body of literature in which male envy of the female's procreative function is established and considered a crucial aspect of sexual dynamics. Given that most cultures are patriarchal, however, it is clear that such feelings are not openly acknowledged, and indeed are concealed and suppressed. How is man to maintain and justify political power over woman if the truth of his awe and envy of the female sex comes out? In the "primitive" societies described by Mead and Bettelheim, this envy is released in the form of established cultural rituals. In modern Western society, however, such sanctioned avenues of expression do not exist, and envy wears more oblique disguises.

It is my contention that the rhetoric of magic is one of those disguises, one of those cultural artifacts in which the male envy of the female procreative powers is manifest. Yet what is there about magical practice that supports such a reading?

I have already mentioned the general emphasis in conjuring tricks on the notion of creation or birth, be it rabbits from a hat, women from umbrellas, or automata that move. But there are many standard magic tricks which evince a more overt symbolism. Within the canon of theatrical magic there are, for example, a whole series of tricks which involve the central prop of an *egg*. *Dunninger's Complete Encyclopedia of Magic* lists such tricks as "Eggs Extraordinary," in which a designated card is found within an egg, "Miraculous Eggs" in which a ring is produced from an egg, and "The Coin in Egg."[23] *The Magic Catalogue* notes tricks with even more tendentious implications. A trick entitled "Human Hen," for example, is described as follows:

> Egg after egg . . . are produced from magician's (or friend's) mouth. They are placed into a clear bowl, or tray in plain view of everyone. You can make as many eggs as you wish appear. Mouth is seen as empty after each egg is removed. Eggs are real and can be cracked open to prove so.[24]

Shades of Professor Unrath and The Blue Angel.

Other tricks, not specifically involving eggs, have similar birth implications. One entitled, "Baby Trousseau Production" entails a male magician and a male subject:

> Performer shakes hands with person who helped him, notices a ravel on their [sic] collar. When he pulls it, it is really a tape, and as he continues to pull, audience sees that it is a long string of fluttering dolls clothes in all colors. This causes a big laugh which gets bigger when a baby nursing bottle seemingly full of milk and complete with nipples, shows up on the end of the tape line.[25]

In a similar vein, one reads in the history of stage magic of a turn-of-the-century Mongolian conjurer, Chin Ling Foo, who "was noted for his production of large bowls of water or small children from an apparently empty cloth."[26]

While these tricks tend to mimic the procreative act, the canon of "escape tricks" evince a male anxiety about the birth process itself. In *Houdini on Magic*, for example, the trick of "The

Spanish Maiden" is described in terms that foreground those fears:

> [The Spanish Maiden] is shaped like a human body and the front is painted to resemble a maiden. The device hinges open at the side and both sections of the interior are lined with iron spikes. When you enter the device, you take a position between the spikes. The front is then closed, so that the spikes completely trap you within. Padlocks are attached to staples on the outside of the Maiden to prevent you from opening the device. Nevertheless, soon after the cabinet is placed over the Spanish Maiden, you make your escape.[27]

The history of trick films evince similar associations of magic and birth. The Star Film Catalogue lists such Mélies films as *Prolific Magical Egg* and *Marvelous Egg Producing with Surprising Developments*, both of 1902. And in *The Brahmin and the Butterfly* (1900) the character of a male magician conjures a caterpillar from an "egg shaped cocoon," which then turns into a beautiful princess.

Many other films, though devoid of overt egg symbolism, nonetheless display a submerged iconography of birth. In *Pierrot's Problem*, for example, the magician-clown seems to give birth to two young women from out of his baggy pantaloons. (Though he eventually "combines" them into one huge "Great Mother" of a woman.) Similarly, it is telling that so many magic films (like *The Red Spectre* and *L'Enchanteur Alcofrisbas*) employ as their settings caves and grottoes. For according to historians of myth, like Mircea Eliade, these locales have commonly been associated with the world's womb in primitive Earth-Mother cults.[28] Finally, it is interesting to note that many magician's props seem to embody womb symbolism. One thinks of the classic "magic box," so nicely labeled as such in Mélies's *Extraordinary Illusions*. One notices as well the countless films (like *The Red Spectre* and *L'Enchanteur Alcofrisbas*) in which women are conjured from urns, as though to literalize the notion of womb as "magic vessel."

Thus in many magic films, the prestidigitation performed by the male magician seems to have relevance to the issue of birth. It is as though through magical practice the male can symbolically imitate, or even appropriate, an aspect of female procreative powers.

It is interesting to note in this respect the existence of a magic film that runs *counter* to this example, a film in which the role of female as procreator is not suppressed. In an extraordinary Pathé trick film of ca. 1906, entitled *Transformation*, a *female* magician conjures live male and female babies out of a series of flowers and vegetables, and ends the film with the children bouncing blissfully on her knee.[29] Thus the subtext of female procreation which seems masked in most examples of magical practice, is, in this film, somehow liberated, or brought to the surface.

In summary, then, the rhetoric of magic—in its theatrical and cinematic varieties—constitutes a complex *drama of male-female relations*. In the guise of the magician figure, the male enacts a series of symbolic rituals in which he expresses numerous often-contradictory attitudes toward woman: his desire to exert power over her, to employ her as decorative object, to cast her as a sexual fantasy, to exorcize her imagined powers of death, and to appropriate her real powers of procreation.

At various points in this essay I have mentioned how the genre of the trick film owes its heritage to the legacy of theatrical magic. Yet the question arises as to *why* the conventions of stage magic were so easily translated onto the screen. Is there something *specific* to the cinematic medium that makes it appropriate for the conventions of magic, and if so, what implications might this have on the issue of women and film?

Clearly, the very nature of the cinematic medium links it with magic, for the photographic process has always held for people a magical aura. Though grounded in physical realities, photography still strikes us as producing an image "conjured" (albeit "developed" in a wash of Kodak chemicals.)

Historically, *motion* picture photography had even stronger ties to magic. One of the early predecessors of the film projector was, of course, the magic lantern, a device which projected painted, often animated slides. Clearly cinema, with its use of photography and its perfection of the illusion of movement, created even a more "magical" image of life. As Parker Tyler has written:

> Camera trickery is really camera magic, for illusion can be freely created by the movie camera with more mathematical

> accuracy and shock value than by sleight-of-hand or stage illusion. The very homogeneity of cinema illusion—the images of the actors themselves are illusive, their corporeal bodies absent—creates a throwback in the mood of the spectator to the vestiges . . . of ancient beliefs . . .[30]

It is interesting that among the trick films of the era are some whose iconography provides a commentary on the perceived magical qualities of the film medium. In *A Spiritualist Photographer* (Mélies/1903), for example, a male magician appears on stage with a huge empty picture frame. He fits blank paper into the frame and stands a woman before it. As a torch burns beneath her, she magically dissolves onto the photographic paper. The magician rolls up the print and the flesh and blood woman reappears.

This same play with conjuring the image of women appears in *The Red Spectre*. As part of the devil-magician's competition with his female counterpart, he produces not live women but the *image* of women on a movie-type screen. Having done this, he lies beneath the ersatz screen and peers lasciviously at his nubile creations.

Several things can be concluded from the activities portrayed in these two films. First, they establish that the photographic act is seen as a kind of conjuring; producing a cinematic image is viewed as a "magic trick" equivalent to those one might perform on stage. Secondly, they demonstrate how readily the magic of the film image was associated with the image of the *female*. As theatrical magicians had obsessively made live women appear on stage, so the film magicians might conjure their images on screen.

Still another film of this era seems to literalize the notion of the cinematic apparatus as a magical device for producing women. In Mélies's *The Magic Lantern* (1903) we find the characters of Pierrot and Harlequin in a children's play room. Early on in the film they assemble a huge magic lantern and project its light upon the wall. After a while, however, they become curious about what is inside the lantern's cavity. They open it up and, as though from a mechanical birth chamber, a stream of women swarm out.

Thus the legacy of magic in film is twofold. On the superficial level, there is cinema's historical inheritance of the conventions of stage magic, as manifest quite literally in the trick films of Edison, Pathé, Mélies and others.[31] On a deeper level, however, is the primitive association of the film image itself with a conjured magical illusion.

Given the "sexual politics" of magic, what might the implications be, for the portrayal of women in film, of the association of cinema and magic? Clearly, this is a complex question that cannot be summarily answered; but several preliminary speculations present themselves. There would seem to be, within the history of cinema, a group of male film-makers who strongly identify the directorial role with that of a magician. Often, they are directors who display a great ambivalence toward women in their films.* Orson Welles, for example, in *F for Fake* (1973), flamboyantly adopts the stance of a master conjurer; but in his earlier film, *Lady from Shanghai* (1949), he casts Rita Hayworth as a perversely magical ensnarer of men. Jean Cocteau, in *The Testament of Orpheus* (1959) flaunts his own and cinema's trickery, but in his earlier *Orpheus* (1949) reveals woman (in the figure of Eurydice) to be the true source of magic in life and in art. Busby Berkeley, of course, is an obvious pledge for this fraternity, conjuring women from safely off-screen with all the male bravado that Mélies displayed so guilelessly on stage.

There is also the case of a director like Ingmar Bergmar who, though admitting the lure of the cinema's magic, seems more qualified in his enthusiasm for the conjurer's posture. In his film *The Magician* (1958) he creates the character of Albert Vogler, a rather morose and somber magician who stands in contrast to the wry and mischievous figures cut by Mélies or Welles.[32] Significantly, within the narrative of *The Magician* the issue of the relation of women to magic is foregrounded. An old woman in Vogler's magic troupe seems to have more powers than he does and, in fact, brews all the potent medicines that he sells. Yet, typically, she is regarded as a witch, and never performs on stage. Various male members of the magic troupe utilize their association with magic to control women. Tubul sells the cook, Sofia, a "love potion," and Simson woos the naive Sara by telling her how "magic attracts women." Most interesting of all, is the fact that for half the film Vogler's wife and magician's assistant, Manda,

*An exception is Jacques Rivette who, in *Celine and Julie Go Boating*, openly invests the two female main characters with magical powers.

is disguised (at his request) as the male, Aman—a name that is an anagram for "Manda," but also for the English words "a man." Finally, another character in the film, Mrs. Egerman, believes that Vogler has the power to bring back her deceased child. Throughout the film the magician's powers are cast in terms that suggest the cinema. Thus Vogler's act involves magic lanterns and shadows projected on screens; and he has the power to summon huge disembodied faces, which seem like nothing so much as film close-ups.

Bergman, himself, admits that his own fascination with cinema began with the childhood gift of a magic lantern, complete with a set of colored glass fairy-tale slides. But it was the acquisition a few years later of a film projector that had a profound effect upon the young director; and Bergman's recollection of that childhood experience makes clear his almost unconscious association of the powers of women, magic and the cinema. Thus he speaks of his own first encounter with a "vanishing lady:"

> When I was ten years old I received my first, rattling film projector, with its chimney and lamp. I found it both mystifying and fascinating. The first film I had was nine feet long and brown in color. It showed a girl lying asleep in a meadow, who woke up and stretched out her arms, then disappeared to the right. That was all there was to it. The film was a great success and was projected every night until it broke and could not be mended any more.
>
> This little rickety machine was my first conjuring set. And even today, I remind myself with childish excitement that I am really a conjurer . . .[33]

A MYSTIC REINCARNATION
(Biograph 1902)

NOTES

1. There are several people I would like to thank in relation to this article. The first is my aunt, Frances Levine, who encouraged me to write the piece. Bob Summers of The Museum of Modern Art graciously provided me with the Library of Congress prints with which to pursue my research. Robert Haller, of Pittsburgh Film-Makers, gave me the opportunity to test my ideas at a lecture there in June. Mark Wicclair helped in that presentation by preparing slides for my lecture as did Craig Johnson in editing a selection of trick films.
2. Paul Hammond, *Marvellous Méliès* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1974), p. 30.
3. William Doerflinger, *The Magic Catalogue* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977), pp. 21, 41.
4. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).
5. Thus far I have based my research largely on the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection as well as on those trick films available through commercial distribution. Further research would have to be done into archival holdings and trick film descriptions to ascertain precisely how uncommon female magicians were in this genre. Eileen Bowser and Bob Summers of The Museum of Modern Art have informed me that, based on the screenings at the FIAF Brighton Conference, female magician figures were most common in Pathé films. This has been born out by my examination of *The Red Spectre* and *Transformation*, discussed later in this article.
6. Wolfgang Lederer, *The Fear of Women* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1968), p. 57.
7. H. R. Hays, *The Dangerous Sex* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1964), p. 141.
8. Hays, p. 141.
9. Cited in footnotes 6 and 7.
10. Gregory Zilboorg, "Masculine and Feminine: Some Biological and Cultural Aspects," in *Psychoanalysis and Women*, ed. Jean Baker (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. 96–131; Karen Horney, "The Dread of Woman" in her *Feminine Psychology*, ed. Harold Kelman (New York: Norton, 1967), pp. 133–146; Freida Fromm-Reichmann and Virginia Gunst, "On the Denial of Women's Sexual Pleasure" in Baker, pp. 86–93.
11. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo, Gesammelte Werk IX*, p. 180 as discussed in Lederer, pp. 2–7.
12. Sigmund Freud, "Medusa's Head" in his *Sexuality and Love*, ed. Philip Reiff (New York: Collier Books, 1963), pp. 212–213.
13. Discussed in Lederer, p. 3.
14. Fromm-Reichmann and Gunst, p. 88.
15. Hays, p. 215.
16. These tricks are listed in Doerflinger as well as in *Dunninger's Complete Encyclopedia of Magic* (New York: Spring Books).
17. Sigmund Freud, "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," in Rieff, p. 188.
18. Karen Horney, "The Flight From Womanhood," in Kelman, pp. 60–61.
19. Reichmann and Gunst, p. 91.
20. Zilboorg, p. 124.
21. Margaret Mead, *Male and Female* (New York: William Morrow, 1949), pp. 102–103.
22. Bruno Bettelheim, *Symbolic Wounds: Puberty Rites and the Envious Male* (New York: Collier Books, 1971), pp. 109–110.
23. Dunninger, pp. 139, 262, 278.

24. Doerflinger, p. 123.
25. Doerflinger, p. 113.
26. Doerflinger, p. 26.
27. Walter B. Gibson and Morris N. Young, eds., *Houdini on Magic* (New York: Dover, 1953), p. 118.
28. Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1960), p. 117.
29. Again, as mentioned in footnote 5, it is significant that this film is attributed (by Reel Images, its distributor) to Pathé.
30. Parker Tyler, "Preface" to *Magic and Myth of the Movies* in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford, 1974), p. 586.
31. For the most complete discussion of the influence of magicians on movies see: Eric Barnouw, "The Magician and the Movies," *American Film*, Part I (April 1978), Part II (May 1978).
32. My comments on *The Magician* are, unfortunately, based on the published screenplay, since I was unable to view the film at the time of writing this piece. See Ingmar Bergman, *Four Screenplays of Ingmar Bergman*, trans. Lars Malmstrom and David Kushner (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960).
33. Ingmar Bergman, "Introduction" to *Four Screenplays*, pp. xiv-xv. Most of the films that I have discussed in this article will soon be available on a single reel through Film Circulation, The Museum of Modern Art.

Reviews

THE MEETINGS OF ANNA

Director: Chantal Akerman. Script: Akerman. Director of photography: Jean Penzer. Editing: Francine Sandberg. New Yorker Films.

Chantal Akerman's *The Meetings of Anna* (1978) is a brilliant, innovative film that challenges our expectations with a simple clarity that is perceptually strong and emotionally compelling. As in her earlier work *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), its radical style forces us to become aware of filmic conventions that we normally accept as realistic but which actually distort our conception of experience.

The plot is minimal. A young Belgian filmmaker named Anna (Aurore Clement) travels to a German city to appear at the screening of her latest film, then returns home to Paris. Though this may sound like a potentially glamorous situation, Akerman's unconventional treatment goes against our expectations. We never see the glamorous scene of the celebrity appearing before her fans; instead, Akerman focuses on what is usually omitted in movies—the detailed physical actions of a character in isolation. Most of the time, we see Anna alone—walking through a train station, riding in a train, staring out a window, or lying in her bed in a hotel room. She is between films and between meetings with other lonely individuals.

The structure of the film is framed by these long stretches of isolation, interrupted by five specific meetings: a one-night stand with a German grade-school teacher, who is looking for a wife; a brief visit in a train station with the mother of her former fiancé, who still wants Anna as a daughter-in-law; a chance encounter on a train with a stranger seeking romantic adventure; a one-night stop-over in Brussels with her mother, whom she hasn't seen in three years; and a reunion in Paris with her lover, whose anticipation of future disappointments destroys their enjoyment of the present. These five encounters raise expectations both in the characters and in the audience. Whom will she meet next—a stranger, friend, lover, or relative? What will the person want from Anna? What role will each be expected to play? What will result from the exchange?

By watching these encounters, we learn that Anna is a person who tries to minimize her expectations so that she won't be disillusioned, but she nevertheless is trapped into wanting more than she gets. Anna knows her commitment to her art means that she must give up other more conventional choices. Despite twice breaking an engagement and having two abortions, she still hopes to have children. It's as if Anna knows that the relationship between mother and child holds more potential for her both as an artist and as a woman. In fact, her meeting with her mother is the only encounter in the film that is emotionally satisfying. In her various meetings we perceive that there are marked differences in expectations between the sexes and the generations. In contrast to Anna who pursues work and independence, the men that she meets yearn for

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24. Doerflinger, p. 123.
25. Doerflinger, p. 113.
26. Doerflinger, p. 26.
27. Walter B. Gibson and Morris N. Young, eds., *Houdini on Magic* (New York: Dover, 1953), p. 118.
28. Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1960), p. 117.
29. Again, as mentioned in footnote 5, it is significant that this film is attributed (by Reel Images, its distributor) to Pathé.
30. Parker Tyler, "Preface" to *Magic and Myth of the Movies* in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford, 1974), p. 586.
31. For the most complete discussion of the influence of magicians on movies see: Eric Barnouw, "The Magician and the Movies," *American Film*, Part I (April 1978), Part II (May 1978).
32. My comments on *The Magician* are, unfortunately, based on the published screenplay, since I was unable to view the film at the time of writing this piece. See Ingmar Bergman, *Four Screenplays of Ingmar Bergman*, trans. Lars Malmstrom and David Kushner (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960).
33. Ingmar Bergman, "Introduction" to *Four Screenplays*, pp. xiv-xv. Most of the films that I have discussed in this article will soon be available on a single reel through Film Circulation, The Museum of Modern Art.

Reviews

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Chantal Akerman's *The Meetings of Anna* (1978) is a brilliant, innovative film that challenges our expectations with a simple clarity that is perceptually strong and emotionally compelling. As in her earlier work *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), its radical style forces us to become aware of filmic conventions that we normally accept as realistic but which actually distort our conception of experience.

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The structure of the film is framed by these long stretches of isolation, interrupted by five specific meetings: a one-night stand with a German grade-school teacher, who is looking for a wife; a brief visit in a train station with the mother of her former fiancé, who still wants Anna as a daughter-in-law; a chance encounter on a train with a stranger seeking romantic adventure; a one-night stop-over in Brussels with her mother, whom she hasn't seen in three years; and a reunion in Paris with her lover, whose anticipation of future disappointments destroys their enjoyment of the present. These five encounters raise expectations both in the characters and in the audience. Whom will she meet next—a stranger, friend, lover, or relative? What will the person want from Anna? What role will each be expected to play? What will result from the exchange?

By watching these encounters, we learn that Anna is a person who tries to minimize her expectations so that she won't be disillusioned, but she nevertheless is trapped into wanting more than she gets. Anna knows her commitment to her art means that she must give up other more conventional choices. Despite twice breaking an engagement and having two abortions, she still hopes to have children. It's as if Anna knows that the relationship between mother and child holds more potential for her both as an artist and as a woman. In fact, her meeting with her mother is the only encounter in the film that is emotionally satisfying. In her various meetings we perceive that there are marked differences in expectations between the sexes and the generations. In contrast to Anna who pursues work and independence, the men that she meets yearn for

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romance, babies, and security; the traditional sex roles seem to be reversed. Her lover Daniel fantasizes, "If I were a woman, I'd get pregnant and forget the rest." In her mother's generation, the men are falling apart and the women try to hold things together, hoping for a better life for their children. In both generations, it's the women who stay in touch with the physical and emotional reality; the men seem exhausted or broken and seek women to restore them, one way or another. By pursuing her own career and by rejecting the traditional female role of nurturing others, Anna tends to disappoint everyone she encounters—everyone except her mother.

When Anna is reunited with her lover Daniel (Jean-Pierre Cassel), she seems eager to please him. Her own expectations, though minimal, are still disappointed. When she comes to him fresh from a bath, smiling warmly and cheerfully singing him a song, she is obviously ready to make love. He says with self pity: "Soon we'll make love, and tomorrow you'll be gone, and I'll want you more than ever." As if familiar with this complaint, she replies: "And tomorrow at 8 you'll be at work." He says flatly, "We have 6-1/2 hours—lie on top of me." She complies by taking off her robe and embracing him. She is nude and vulnerable; he is fully dressed and suddenly feels sick. She is forced to go out for medicine and to switch from playing mistress to nursemaid. Alone in the back seat of a cab, she releases tears of frustration, repressed anger, and bitter disappointment. But this is just a brief interlude. Soon she returns to Daniel with medicine and is again punished for her independence with another sexual rejection. The film ends with Anna alone in her own apartment, listening to the telephone answering machine that has recorded messages from dejected people who didn't find her at home. The film leaves us feeling that no matter what life we choose and no matter how we try to control our expectations, we cannot escape disappointment.

Like *Jeanne Dielman, The Meetings of Anna* challenges the audience's expectations of how a film is to be experienced. At first, like the people she encounters, we tend to be disappointed by Anna. When she is alone, she seems drab, expressionless, cold, and withdrawn. Even when

Daniel (Jean-Pierre Cassel) and Anna (Aurore Clement) in THE MEETINGS OF ANNA

she is with others, she rarely smiles. Aurore Clement is not fascinating to watch the way Delphine Seyrig was in *Jeanne Dielman.* But this is a different movie; we must reject the expectations carried over from the earlier film or they will distort our experience of this one.

Jeanne's first encounter is with a stranger named Heinrich Snyder (Helmut Griem), whom she meets at a screening and takes back to her hotel room. While they are making love, she abruptly decides to make him leave, because "we don't love each other." He claims, "I feel I've known you for ages." She sticks to the facts, "But you haven't . . . get dressed." In the awkward moments while he dresses, he speaks to himself as if no one else were there: "You think it will be a wonderful evening . . . Then she says 'get dressed' and you're alone." Later in the scene with Daniel, Anna will experience a similar disappointment, but now she responds without emotion: "I never expect it to be wonderful. I never expect anything." Still, Heinrich persists in trying to get to know her and invites her to spend the next day with him, his daughter, and his mother. Her curiosity about the daughter and mother makes her accept. Yet in the scene that follows we see only Anna and Heinrich, who tells her the story of his life. Heinrich wants to cast Anna in the role of his missing wife. His professions of love are based on the power of his own romantic yearnings. They really have nothing to do with Anna, for he knows nothing about her. While her rejection of him may seem unfeeling, it is based on personal integrity—the desire to be known for what she is. There is no way she can fulfill his expectations and remain true to herself.

This encounter is analogous to the relationship between the film and its audience. Anna is a fictional version of Akerman (which she acknowledged following the screening at Filmex), just as Heinrich is presumably a member of her audience. The audience comes to the theater with expectations based on past film-viewing experience. Akerman cannot fulfill those expectations and remain true to herself as an independent artist. Her films are valuable precisely because they deconstruct the narrative conventions that mold our false conceptions of reality. Conventional dramatic features have trained us to expect to meet protagonists early in the narrative and immediately to love them, partly by identifying them with ourselves or with other loved ones from our personal past. This means that we really don't have to get to know the protagonist, for we can project qualities onto a two-dimensional figure in conventional situations and feel that we've known her for ages! But in this film we are forced to get to know Anna in an unusual way—partly because she is on screen alone so much of the time (we are used to getting acquainted with film characters through their interactions with others and their involvements in plots) and partly because her qualities are revealed very gradually. This process is actually closer to real experience, for we get to know ourselves in the time we spend alone, and we get to know others by a gradual exposure to a wide range of behavior. In both cases, we eventually recognize the combination of the unique and the conventional so that the person is no longer interchangeable with others. We can love someone only when we know that person and can distinguish him or her from others. Some people in the audience get impatient with Akerman's slow pace and leave before ever getting to know Anna, but those who stay learn to recognize her warmth and vitality, which make her more lovable. We see *how* she loves by watching the expressions on her face and the movement of her eyes as she watches her mother, or by the way she sings a song and smiles at Daniel. Once Anna has revealed herself, she is more vulnerable to rejection. She generates new expectations in those who know her, and then rejection is far more painful, as it is with Daniel in the last encounter, because only then is it truly personal.

Our expectations concerning the characters are powerfully affected by Akerman's brilliant casting. Most of the performers bring expectations from former roles in other movies, which comment on their parts in *The Meeting of Anna.* In *Lacombe Lucien,* Aurore Clement played a young Jewish girl who was forced into hiding because of the war; in a desperate attempt to experience life, she has a romance with a young fascist who helps her and her grandmother escape. That role helps to reveal the cultural roots of Anna, who is also a Jew but of the next generation. We learn in the scene with her mother that Anna was born after her parents fled Germany and resettled in Belgium, a fact which adds another dimension to her present journey through Germany and her rejection of Heinrich. The casting of Aurore Clement strengthens the bonds between the two generations. Akerman seems to suggest that Anna's freedom is built on the actions of her mother, who had a very different struggle. In both *Jeanne Dielman* and *The Meetings of Anna,* the father is absent and ambiguous, but the mother is of central importance. Here she is much stronger and more vital than in the earlier film, particularly as played by Lea Masari, who is well known for her performance as another unconventional young mother in *Murmur of the Heart.* Masari and Clement look more like sisters or friends than mother and daughter. By putting them in the same bed, where Anna tells her about a sexual encounter with another woman who reminded her of her mother, Akerman suggests the possibility of incest between mother and daughter, which is practically unheard of in all of literature and film. The casting of Lea Masari, who is already associated in our minds with a positive experience of incest, helps to strengthen this dimension of the encounter.

Anna's strong attraction to her mother is foreshadowed in her earlier encounter with Ida, who is not only the mother of the man whom Anna almost married, but who is also like a sister to Anna's mother. When Anna tells her she still wants children, Ida offers to raise them for her. We begin to suspect that Anna is more emotionally involved with this woman than with her

son, primarily because of the strong identification between Ida and her mother. Yet Ida is far more conventional and less insightful than Anna's mother; she tells Anna the story of her love for her husband, a sad narrative that can hardly make Anna regret her own broken engagement. The emotional involvement between the two women is strengthened by the casting of Magali Noel, who in Fellini's *Amarcord* played the young protagonist's prototype of the highly sexual older woman, who disappoints him by using her extraordinary erotic power to trap herself in a secure bourgeois marriage to a very ordinary man.

Casting also plays a significant role in Anna's reactions to the men she meets in Germany. She is likely to reject them not only because of the historical past, but also because of their past roles in earlier films. Helmut Griem plays the idealistic teacher who claims he doesn't understand the war or his relationships with his wife (who left him for a Turk) or his best friend (who was forced to leave his job and the town because of his leftist views); he laments over lost hopes and now seeks only peace and quiet. It is hard for us, as well as Anna, to believe in his blindness and innocence partly because we associate Griem with his earlier roles as the decadent aristocrat in *Cabaret* and the ruthless Nazi in *The Damned.* While she is riding on a train, Anna is approached by a man who is on his way to France, "the land of freedom," where he hopes to find love. It turns out to be the sixth country he's tried. This romantic passenger is played by Hanns Zieschler, one of the protagonists of Wim Wenders's *Kings of the Road,* which deals with a similar encounter between strangers in transit. This casting suggests that Zieschler will forever move from film to film playing the same role of the Eternal Wanderer. The casting of Jean-Pierre Cassel as Daniel is also a brilliant stroke, not only because he gives a great performance, but also because he has come to epitomize in the seventies the modern bourgeois sensibility as embodied in a self-centered, hyperactive, intelligent, boyishly attractive middle-aged lover—whether in a realistic melodrama like *No Time for Breakfast* or an unconventional satire like *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie.*

As in *Jeanne Dielman,* Akerman's primary

Anna with her mother (Lea Masari)

challenge to our expectations comes through the symmetrical visual compositions, the recurring patterns of imagery, and the slow editing pace. The amazing thing is that the radicalism of her style depends so heavily on a basic simplicity. The visuals lack ambiguity and density; there is usually a solidity of form in the *mise-en-scène.* She always seems to know exactly where to put the camera and exactly how to frame the image, and then sticks with that choice. The typical set-up is a medium close-up of a symmetrical composition without any camera movement. Whenever the camera or a filmed object does move, it is always purposeful and direct. When combined with the slow editing pace and the pattern of recurring images, these visual choices create a strong quality of stability.

The opening image is a static, symmetrical shot of a train platform, with a descending stairway in the middle of the frame, behind which is an empty telephone booth. Although the camera never moves in the scene, motion suddenly breaks the stillness as a train roars into the station on the track that borders the right side of the frame and deposits people offscreen who hurriedly walk directly in front of the camera and rush down the stairs to the station. Only one figure emerges from the crowd—a woman who walks to the phone booth with her back to the camera, enters and makes a call. Only when she leaves do we briefly glimpse Anna's face before she turns and descends the stairs. The camera holds its position on the deserted, silent platform. Then another train rushes into the station on the track that borders the left side of the frame, signalling the beginning of a new cycle in the rhythmic alternations between stasis and motion, silence and clatter, isolation and encounter that dominate the film.

This unconventional opening raises a number of intriguing structural questions that are central to the film. The visual style makes it difficult to determine what is foregrounded, or what we are waiting to see—the empty, silent station (which could be perceived merely as a setting or background for the action), or the rushing people and trains (which could be perceived as temporary intrusions). Anna, in her phone booth, mediates between the two choices, as she is singled out in her attempt to make contact and in her slower lingering pace. When we learn in the next sequence that Anna is a film-maker on tour with her latest film, this pattern also applies to the creative process—her life is a series of intense, highly focused periods of creativity alternating with rambling stretches on the road. Each of her films is a form of one-way communication—like the phone call in the opening where she doesn't reach her party or the train of phone messages she receives in the final scene. Akerman accentuates this one-way communication by having the sound track alternate between silence and long monologues (where one person talks while the other listens), just as the visual track alternates between stasis and sudden motion. The opening image of the train station is a perfect representation of Akerman's view of her medium —a two-track system (audio and visual) for an imperfect one-way communication.

The second sequence opens with Anna entering a hotel through automatic doors, which snap shut after she passes through. A hotel clerk opens the curtains from left to right, allowing us to see through the window a train moving in the same direction. Once she is alone in her room, Anna opens the window and lets in the noise from the street below. This sequence quickly establishes a recurring pattern of trains, doors, and windows that represent Anna's cinematic view of experience. We are constantly aware of the train of thoughts, feelings, images, and sounds running through her consciousness; the doors that lead her into new spaces of action and close her off from others; the windows, like movie screens, through which she observes the rest of the world at a safe distance. The cinematic connection is underscored in a later sequence where she is looking through the window of a train as it passes through the underground station in Brussels; the black passageways interrupt the brightly lit scenes like the shutter of a camera. In the early sequences Anna is more frequently associated with the trains moving restlessly in the distance than with the static forms in the frame. For example, in the scene where she is visiting the country house where Heinrich was born, they stand in the foreground facing each other symmetrically. He tells her his whole family loves her and reaches out to take her hand. She simply says no and leaves without a goodbye while he laments, "I feel so alone." The camera remains motionless, focused on Heinrich who stands still in the foreground as Anna walks away from Heinrich and his house, disappearing from the frame and then reappearing in midground as she walks diagonally toward the train that is moving deep in the background.

The second sequence in the hotel also continues and elaborates the recurring image of telephone communication. When Anna entered the lobby, she was informed that she had missed two calls—one from Paris (presumably from Daniel) and the other from her mother (who mysteriously discovers where she is). When Anna tries to make a call, she is told she must wait two hours. The whole film, which is slightly longer than two hours (127 minutes), is like the waiting period. Alone in her room, she tries to pass the time—by listening to music on the radio, by letting in the street sounds, by exploring the closet where she finds a tie, which is both literally and figuratively the only tie between her and the former transient occupants of this room. She calls the hotel clerk to report the missing tie, almost apologizing for initiating the contact: "I realize the two hours haven't gone by yet." Then she decides to call Ida in Cologne, as if to fill in for her mother. She is surprised when she reaches Ida and hurries off the phone because she's expecting another call. This pattern of phone calls foreshadows the narrative development, for the brief meeting with Ida precedes the longer, more satisfying visit with her mother, just as the sexual encounter with Heinrich in this hotel room foreshadows the more painful hotel scene with Daniel. Thus the film is doubly framed by missed connections —abortive phone calls, and sexual rejections.

Yet one loving message mysteriously gets through —to Anna's mother. Just as Akerman has described *Jeanne Dielman* as a loveletter to her mother, this film could be seen as a loving telephone call to the same person. Their meeting is preceded by the brief encounter with the romantic man on the train who travels to foreign lands, searching for an exotic woman to love. In contrast, Anna is on her way home to reaffirm her love for her own flesh and blood. The harmonious, symmetrical visuals in their reunion scene highlight the natural affinity between mother and daughter. The first time we see Anna smile in the film is the moment when she recognizes her mother in the station. Her face lights up, and suddenly our expectations for the character and the film are transformed. The two women slowly walk toward each other, embrace, and then stand in the center of the brightly lit room in long shot between two massive columns. We don't have to hear what they say because we can see from their faces and movements that they are very happy with each other. Then they walk out of the frame together, leaving the camera in the empty station as in the opening sequence. Later in a restaurant, they are again placed near two columns, this time with a mirror placed symmetrically in the center. The loving identification between them, suggested in the *mise-en-scène*, is underscored by the dialogue. The mother tells Anna, "You have my mother's eyes." Anna says, "I wish I were like you." In the hotel room, they both lie on their backs looking up into the camera, confiding in and listening intently to each other in a loving mutuality. Anna describes her lesbian encounter: "I felt nauseous, I felt sick. Then everything felt simple. I let myself go. It felt good . . . for some strange reason, I thought of you." She asks her mother, "Have you ever loved a woman?" Although her mother replies, "I don't know, I never thought of it," we can see that she loves Anna. At the end of their visit, as the two women stand facing each other in the train station in the center of the screen, the mother says, "Anna, tell me you love me." She replies, "I love you."

However renewing this loving encounter may be, it makes Anna have greater expectations and thus experience greater disappointment in the painful reunion with Daniel that immediately follows. In contrast to the dazzling smiles, leisurely embrace, and spacious well lit setting in Brussels, her first moments in Paris with Daniel are dark, hurried, and confusing. Although we see them together in a symmetrical shot in the car, we can't see their faces and are unsure of their feelings. She asks what's wrong; he replies, "The usual grind. Tons of work." He's obviously unhappy, but claims he wants to be with her. Like Anna and her mother, they spend the night in a strange hotel, but the room he chooses is ultra modern; they stare out the window, reacting to each other's reflections. Daniel turns on the television and leaves it flickering in the background, as if to create a distraction. In contrast to the scenes with her mother, here there is little mutuality. Daniel does most of the talking and makes most of the decisions, even questioning Anna's desire to take a bath. When he is turned on, he fondles her ass; but later when she does the same thing to him, he impatiently makes her stop. Although he doesn't know what he wants, he's sure he's not going to lose control. He can't let go, as Anna was able to do in her lesbian encounter. Whenever Anna touches him, he seems dissatisfied or ambivalent, and quickly changes the mode of their interaction. He can't decide whether he wants to play the authoritative father or the whining child, but his impulsive shifts demand that Anna change her role to suit his mood. One suspects that Anna wants to save her mothering for a real child.

The film ends with Anna alone in her own space. Just as in the earlier hotel sequence, as soon as she enters the room she opens the window to let in street sounds. The silence is also broken by the sounds of her footsteps echoing through the sparsely furnished apartment. In a prominent position is a large clean desk with a typewriter and overhead light. This space is clearly set up for work rather than pleasure or relaxation. It provides her with the stability that she didn't find or was unwilling to accept on the road. It is a setting of simple clarity where she can examine the perceptions and feelings she has absorbed on her journey and transform them into a new script. In the final shot, the visual image is a static composition of Anna staring blankly into

the camera as she listens to the sound track—the long train of dismal phone messages with their varying accusations and demands. Although it is a depressing scene, we know that Anna will not be defeated by her loneliness and disappointment. The film assures us that she will continue making films that express her unique vision of the world. Both *Jeanne Dielman* and *The Meetings of Anna* raise our expectations that future films by Chantal Akerman will continue to reveal her bold creativity, courageous honesty, and lucid intelligence. —MARSHA KINDER

MAX HAVELAAR

Director: Fons Rademakers. Script: Gerard Soeteman, based on the novel by Multatuli (Eduard Douwes Dekker). Photography: Jan de Bont. Fons Rademakers Produktie.

For better or for worse, Edward Douwes Dekker's nineteenth-century novel *Max Havelaar* has been called the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of Holland, an impassioned tract that prompted the Dutch government to correct at least some abuses in its administration of Indonesia.

But Dutch film-maker Fons Rademakers has now made this novel about colonialism in the 1850s into a three-hour epic for a late twentieth-century audience. The game—at least that particular game—is over. How is Rademakers to adjust the sights?

Max Havelaar goes one step further than Pontecorvo's *Burn!* whose cynical *agent provocateur* provides the ironic commentary and analysis that both the colonialists and the colonialized are incapable of providing; it goes further than Tomas Gutierrez Alea's *The Last Supper,* whose Cuban sugar plantation owner thinks of himself as a sort of Christ bringing light to the natives who work his plantation (until it no longer proves profitable). It goes further than these films, also radical critiques of past European colonialism, because Max Havelaar, the liberal administrator at the center of this movie (and played with exquisite grace by Peter Faber), is not cynical, nor hypocritical, but, on the contrary, benign, innocent, and entirely unconscious of the malignant nature of the larger structure in which he has been assigned but a small supporting role. For as Havelaar tries to correct abuses and imbalances within the colonial framework, as Havelaar tries really desperately to give *everyone* the benefit of the doubt, he gradually (as it were, against the grain of his character) becomes aware of the real and insidious nature of this system of interlocking interests where unofficial favors and the gentler arts of blackmail always give way, in the last issue, to outright extortion and murder. From the local level where the native regents rule through fear and intimidation, Havelaar is able to pick up and follow the threads that lead through higher and higher levels of colonial administration, leading finally to the throne of William the Third himself, King of Holland, to whom Dekker contemptuously dedicated his novel.

Most of *Max Havelaar* is set in Leback, Java, but the film is framed by sequences in Amsterdam (unlike the novel which continually cuts back to Holland), although the pre-credit sequence occurs in Java. In this sense metaphor becomes structural, the lush tropics hemmed in by the cold dark cities of northern Europe. And Havelaar himself, in spite of his good intentions, in spite of his essentially likeable character, remains an ambiguous figure.

We first see Havelaar, an unemployed poet and pamphleteer, wandering the streets of Amsterdam in 1860 (hence the story's outcome is clear from the start). He runs into an old classmate, a prosperous coffee broker whose interest in Havelaar is only awakened when Havelaar mentions among his pamphlets, "On the Price of Java Coffee" and "On Coffee Culture in Indonesia."

The story soon switches to Leback, Java, 1855, where Havelaar has been assigned to the post of Assistant Resident. Havelaar is not the ordinary Dutch administrator, timid or corrupt. But then neither was his predecessor, who married an Indonesian woman and was preparing corruption charges against the native regent when he was poisoned by the regent with local Dutch officials participating in the subsequent cover-up. Havelaar, unaware of the circumstances in which his predecessor died, is brave, even foolhardy. On the boat traveling to Leback he jumps overboard into shark-infested waters to rescue a puppy (this is just a warm-up for Leback). His adoring wife,

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the camera as she listens to the sound track—the long train of dismal phone messages with their varying accusations and demands. Although it is a depressing scene, we know that Anna will not be defeated by her loneliness and disappointment. The film assures us that she will continue making films that express her unique vision of the world. Both *Jeanne Dielman* and *The Meetings of Anna* raise our expectations that future films by Chantal Akerman will continue to reveal her bold creativity, courageous honesty, and lucid intelligence. —MARSHA KINDER

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Most of *Max Havelaar* is set in Leback, Java, but the film is framed by sequences in Amsterdam (unlike the novel which continually cuts back to Holland), although the pre-credit sequence occurs in Java. In this sense metaphor becomes structural, the lush tropics hemmed in by the cold dark cities of northern Europe. And Havelaar himself, in spite of his good intentions, in spite of his essentially likeable character, remains an ambiguous figure.

We first see Havelaar, an unemployed poet and pamphleteer, wandering the streets of Amsterdam in 1860 (hence the story's outcome is clear from the start). He runs into an old classmate, a prosperous coffee broker whose interest in Havelaar is only awakened when Havelaar mentions among his pamphlets, "On the Price of Java Coffee" and "On Coffee Culture in Indonesia."

The story soon switches to Leback, Java, 1855, where Havelaar has been assigned to the post of Assistant Resident. Havelaar is not the ordinary Dutch administrator, timid or corrupt. But then neither was his predecessor, who married an Indonesian woman and was preparing corruption charges against the native regent when he was poisoned by the regent with local Dutch officials participating in the subsequent cover-up. Havelaar, unaware of the circumstances in which his predecessor died, is brave, even foolhardy. On the boat traveling to Leback he jumps overboard into shark-infested waters to rescue a puppy (this is just a warm-up for Leback). His adoring wife,

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upset by his foolhardiness, protests, but Max firmly believes nothing can happen to him because he is a man with a mission (yet he has a sense of humor). He even believes he was promoted to this post in Java because the governor has great things in mind for him. He is *happy* that this region is so impoverished—all the more for him to do. And in the end, after his vision has been radically transformed, he still believes he has a mission—to expose the ruthlessness and hypocrisy of the Dutch colonial empire, indeed, of the whole society (among the pamphlets the coffee broker takes back to his house and which his startled wife picks up off the floor is "On Marriage as Prostitution").

But at the same time Rademakers introduces a note of alienation absent from the novel. Havelaar remains, in spite of his good intentions, in spite of his opposition to the Dutch and native hierarchies, the unwitting embodiment of Dutch colonialism. Throughout much of the movie the machinations of the native regent, so apparent to the viewers (as is the fear of the villagers who refuse to testify against him because they know Dutch administrators come and go, but the regent remains), seem to be constantly overlooked by Havelaar, less because he's trying to give the regent the benefit of the doubt (as in the novel) and more so, perhaps, because he is in fear himself—in fear of losing his job, in fear of losing his life. The native regents after all occupy superior economic positions to the local Dutch administrators and are capable of commanding more resources. Put differently, Havelaar is constantly forgiving the regent because he has *no choice.* It is to Havelaar's credit that it becomes impossible finally to deceive himself any longer. It is to Rademakers's credit that Havelaar's awakening is placed in some realistic perspective—a drop in the bucket, no more.

And because he is still imperialism's agent in Leback, Havelaar's face is frequently framed in the center of the screen, particularly in close-ups and in medium-shots: Max Havelaar, the eager, newly appointed administrator, against the wide blue skies of Indonesia; Max Havelaar, benign, smiling, against a field of fresh, wet, glowing lilies; Max Havelaar, the storyteller at dinner with his wife and child and guests, against a tropical rainstorm seen through the windows. In short, Max Havelaar, the colonialist agent, who defines the space, who controls the space, who gives symmetry to the geography of the space, of the frame, even while he himself is being shaped, framed, and removed finally from center stage (and center frame) by the powers beyond his own paltry control.

The camera, too, maintains its distance. It is methodic and cool in its relationship to the Indonesian landscape, revealing its beauty without promoting it to the picturesque. It accomplishes this not simply by using the beauty as an ironic backdrop to the poverty of the natives, nor simply by capturing the beauty in cool rather than warm tones, but by tracking methodically along the rows of trees planted by design in the European mode and then juxtaposing these shots to the lush, natural landscape, shot with a more fluid camera.

Where the movie goes awry is in the treatment of a native rebel couple. Rademakers relentlessly romanticizes them—they are physically statuesque, courageous, and finally martyrs. In fact, Rademakers does worse than Dekker who, although he romanticized the couple and wrote the scenario calling for their deaths, accorded them far less space, admitting after a few chapters in fact that they *bored him.* (Here Pontecorvo has the advantage. He has a better feel—better possibly than any white film maker—for nonwhite peoples; he has what amounts to an almost physical sympathy rather than just intellectual empathy.)

Rademakers has, finally, delivered a film that exchanges the heat and passion of Dekker's attack on nineteenth-century Dutch colonialism, for a cooler, more meditative discourse that looks at the sort of liberalism—even liberal outrage—

MAX HAVELAAR ▶

embodied by Havelaar and by Dekker himself. Hence the film, through its cool green and blue tones, its deliberate pacing, its careful framing, and its occasionally startling realism (the death throes of Havellar's predecessor, the fierce battle between a tiger and a water buffalo) avoids becoming another just another adaptation of a famous novel to the screen, and instead superimposes new meaning over the original text without obscuring or sacrificing the latter.

—MICHAEL COVINO

THE LAST SUPPER

Director: Tomas Gutiérrez Alea. Script: Alea, Tomas Gonzales, and Maria Eugenia Haya. Photography: Mario Garcia Joya. Editing: Nelson Rodriguez. US distribution: Tricontinental.

In *The Last Supper (La Ultima Cena)*, Tomas Gutiérrez Alea alters an old adage: "The road to Calvary is paved with good intentions." The central figure (played by Nelson Villagra, a Chilean exile) is a great economic sinner who, like St. Augustine, would like to atone for his sins and be martyred but, unlike Augustine, his penance is only an Easter vacation for his conscience. Nevertheless, the film's own moral integrity prevents it from being a simple satire or anti-clerical tract, and in fact, the metaphoric Holy Week divides the film so as to instruct us about the tradition and how far-removed 18th century morality was from its Christian impulse. The film's didactic function was noted by another Cuban director, Pastor Vega, in an interview at the Berlinale: "*The Last Supper* is one in a series of films attempting to reevaluate the role of the blacks in Cuba's national development . . . One of the tasks of Cuban cinema consists in portraying the role of the African culture within our culture. In addition, the film attacks the traces of Christian spirit imposed by the Spanish conquest. The film has enjoyed a good critical response, and to Tomas's surprise, exacted a humorous reaction from the public to certain scenes which he had conceived as dramatic." Vega further explained how they laugh at their own level of consciousness —a not unhealthy exercise for non-Cuban audiences. But that Alea "attacks the Christian spirit" is too superficial. It is not the spirit, but the body-politic that the film exposes, i.e., a Christian structure with an un-Christian hierarchy.

Alea has been likened to Buñuel in his use of religious history to highlight aspects of consciousness unchanged since the 18th century or earlier. *The Last Supper* opens with scenes invoking the Christian ethic and aesthetic through artistic remains: close-ups of faded baroque frescoes, an angel and a chain that becomes a rosary when the camera draws back to reveal a scene of the Easter passion behind the titles. Like the technical info in the credits, these figures frozen on a cathedral wall tell us where Alea found divine assistants. What makes this a radical historical film is the question, "Is life *still* imitating art?"

Life imitates art only in the person of the plantation owner, whose affectation fails to convince either his slaves or us of his good intentions, when he determines to reenact the last supper. Alea draws his visual style from eighteenth-century painting in a manner not unlike Francisco Goya, whose breadth of portrayal spanned the entire class structure of Spain in that period—from the dark, almost decadent portraits of the Bourbon dynasty to the abrupt and violent compositions of "The Disasters of War."

One of the most violent sequences opens *The Last Supper:* a runaway slave is sought, and the mulatto slave-drivers invade the barracks with whips lashing and dogs barking. The abrupt cut from the slaves' quarters to the manor house, where the plantation-owning Count arrives in red-velvet cut-away coat, establishes the incongruity of the minimal existence of black slaves and the inflation of the Count's life style. The slave master Don Manuel is the fulcrum between master and slave and is responsible for maintaining a balance of power. His death will annul the Count's mask of noblesse oblige. He is a menial in relation to the proprietor, a subjugator of the slaves; portrayed as a plausible apostle of the Count, but not worthy of an invitation to supper. As a mulatto, he is inherently a Judas, and his duty is to carry out the inhumane acts weighing on the Count's conscience, yet to act as a buffer between the apparent savagery of the slaves and the psychic savagery of the Count.

The Count is not individualized by a proper

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THE LAST SUPPER *by Tomas Gutiérrez Alea*

name; Alea's story is starkly symbolic, but his visual style is restrained by neorealism, not surrealism. His use of religion does not descend into anti-Papist dogma or satire. For example, on the veranda the Count is dropping seed into a bird cage, barely visible on the left side of the screen. Alea cannot afford to let the cage become blatant symbolism in a story so structurally defined. But while nurturing his dependent creatures, the Count calls his house slave, who occupies the focal point at mid-screen in a uniform strangely imitative of the Count's garb. His master tells him to ask Don Manuel to summon all the slaves. "And I?" asks the boy, as the camera pans slightly, increasing his stature to equal that of his master. "No, you are my slave," he reassures him and continues dispensing bird-seed.

An amusing semiological note for those who, like myself, have not advanced much beyond Charles Pierce, lies in the use Alea has made of head-gear as signifiers to reinforce the class structure. The Count wears a white-powdered wig, with all the connotations of luxury and plutocracy. His servants—at least, those who aim to serve—wear white bandanas tied in a sort of two-dimensional mimicry of the Count. Their connotative value is reinforced by their similarity to medical and other functional headgear and probably aids us in recognizing the functionary's pride. The involuntary labor presents a mixture of covered and uncovered heads in crowd scenes, but generally, the slaves most representative of their class are bare-headed. Part of the incongruity of the washer-women's appearance lies in the contradiction between their bare breasts and their elegantly turbaned heads. The only head-covering which is used as an index—that is, with an existential bond between itself and its object and with a denotative value—is Sebastian's bandage, whose blood stains indicate his suffering. What Sebastian has covered up needs to be bandaged, not adorned. The Count's wig, on the contrary, has a strictly ornamental value (if we discount its straightening effect on his posture), and at some drunken moments during the last supper, it symbolically slips along with the other niceties of his behavior. He strips this symbol from his head when the slaves set fire to the sugar factory and never dons his fluffy wig again. The armed guards hunting down the slaves also wear broad sun-shielding hats of the functional sort that the priest prefers. And the iconic value of the scene on Calvary cannot be ignored: the bare heads of the slaves are now mounted on stakes in a style of revenge that goes back as far as Cicero's decapitation. In the long shot of the Count standing among them, they appear as small nodules of a crown on his exposed conscience.

Oddly enough, in a film about slaving in the sugarcane fields, we never see slaves actually razing cane. Alea shows what such an inhumane exploitation looks like from the inside rather than

romanticizing forced labor. Thus, we are not given visual proof that blacks sing when they work, as the Count claims—proof of their natural endowment and endurance. When he subsequently swings his glass in an attempt to sing, mourning the loss of such a "natural" ability, he reminds us of another romanticizing and decadent central figure—Alea's Sergio from *Memories of Underdevelopment.* Both characters' judgments and didactic attempts do indicate a certain paradoxical awareness: Sergio says, "The faithful servant and the great lord. The colonialist and Gunga Din. Hemingway must have been unbearable," leading his obedient Elena through a museum in order to civilize her. When the Count frees the slave Pascual, he tells him, "You can't be happy, even though you are free. You have no place to go." The *sine qua non* of happiness is not freedom alone, but rather freedom to exercise choice. Alea remains faithful to the Christian thesis: the Count is trapped in his unhappy role because he does not allow even himself the freedom to choose any other form to express Christianity, which began, after all, as a religion of slaves, not slave-holders.

The narrative complexity of *Memories of Underdevelopment* has been replaced by a simple chronological development over four successive days leading up to a Sunday of Resurrection. The complexity of *The Last Supper* lies in the metaphoric development of Holy Week, observing how these events correspond or do not correspond to the traditional Passion. The Count's attempts to aestheticize the Christian life are amusing, but Alea does not travesty religion itself. His humor has changed little since *Death of a Bureaucrat.* The only religious buffoon is a priest who slips on the river rocks trying to disperse nude washerwomen, in a scene that is essentially slapstick. The Christian message behind the Holy Week metaphor must remain intact to allow the film to denounce slavery on socialism's terms as well as Christianity's. Brotherly love could be revived, if the Count were more than a high priest of a ritual-bound and institutionalized belief. The ritual of sharing at the last supper is reduced to a mere gesture. The Count's self-delusion about his self-sacrifice is a theme found in *Bureaucrat*'s workers, *Underdevelopment*'s survivor, Sergio, and will be seen in *The Survivors' (Los Sobrovivientos,* 1979) justification for their last stand.

The ideological difference between the traditional events of Easter and the events on the plantation is distinguished day by day. The introduction is divided between polite conversation about the nature of knowledge and technique in refining sugarcane and the pursuit of Sebastian, a slave who has run away for the *n*th time. With each successive day, the refinement stands in the way of the resurrection and provokes the insurrection by reneging on promises of rest for the slaves. As the Count ironically flatters his technician, Don Gaspar, with promises to modernize the mill, the technician peers knowingly over his spectacles, musing that the sugar, like the soul, must be cleansed by fire. On the other hand, getting the sugarcane in will depend upon importing more slaves, says the overseer, disrupting the witty chatter and filling up the screen with an angry face demanding more laborers. Don Gaspar warns against repeating the mistake made in Haiti (where the slaves outnumbered the whites and mulattos).

The appearance of the slave-driver cuts short Don Gaspar's explanation, as he handles the hard lumps of sugar, that a man knowledgable about sugar is born, not made. The mulatto's introduction of "grace" indicates a fatal departure from the simple Christian teaching of Psalm 86 (recently cited by Rossellini in *Cineaste,* VII,1), "All of you are Gods because all of you are sons of the same Father." It is difficult for Marxists, Christians, and certainly film critics to dabble in theological disputes that have strained the ideology since Paul's "And if by grace, then is it no more by works." Not grace, but work, produces sugar.

Holy Thursday's banquet, which gives the film its name, is more at home as a genre painting that culminated in the Dutch still-life. Driven either by a truly bad conscience or by an utterly hypocritical martyr complex, the Count adopts the role of Christ, washing the feet of his 12 slaves. In the class system that permits slavery, the transformation of slaves to apostles would indeed be a miracle. A miracle worker the Count is not; a worker he is not; and his "ritual" acts are understood literally by the slave-apostles.

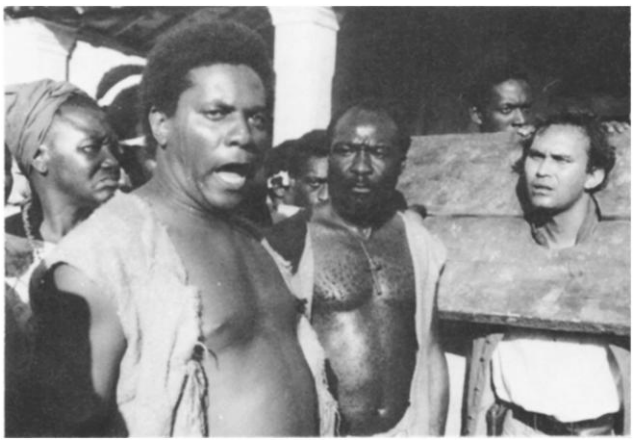
Their hysterical reaction to the Master gritting his teeth as he washes their feet and grimacing with revulsion after kissing the still-unclean foot is both natural and realistic. Likewise, during the meal, when the savior-Count attempts to explain the sacrament as he breaks the bread, the slaves understand him quite literally and object, "My lord should not die." He assures them he doesn't intend to; this is merely an object lesson. The conversation then turns to cannibalism, to the only comparable ritual they know. Alea does not lose a single thread of realism as the slaves explain the human-flesh-eating Carabali tribe, as they gobble down huge chunks of meat. Their literalism and blunt humanism lands us in the discomfort of eternal renewal, while the Count continues to celebrate the mystery of the eucharist in a truly mysterious way. By granting Good Friday as a day of rest, he causes the death of his guests.

In a virtual floorshow, one of the company illustrates why blacks sing the way they do, even when they work. His frenzied performance expounds on the celestial myth of Lucifer's fall as well as man's more terrestrial needs, with the chorus, "I am the Morning Star": a boy sold his father in order that the family could eat, but his mother punished him by selling him also into slavery—and got twice as much. Thus the family ate twice! The tale is a diabolic reflection on slavery as self-punishment; thus, "when the Negro sings, Briyimba weeps." Briyimba and the Morning Star occur in the song as a symbolic reconciliation, however unsatisfactory, of the missionary heritage and so-called primitive man.

The parable next told by the Count-savior could have been drawn from the strange tales of St. Francis and Brother Leo in Pasolini's *Uccellacci e Uccellini.* Happiness, as he defines it, is not only suffering but enjoying suffering and appreciating its purifying power. The Count's affectation of pain is an manneristic as eighteenth-century crucifixes, but Alea's quick cut to Sebastian shows us true pain. When Sebastian was caught, his ear had been cut off and, until now, he has seemed only half-conscious. But his sufferign erupts in a counter-myth: how Olofi created a dualistic world in which both Truth and Deceit were gods. In their struggle, Deceit decapitated Truth. Now Truth spends his time searching for his head, which Deceit salvaged and used as a mask to disguise himself as Truth. Sebastian seizes the head of the roast pig and holds it before his head.

Because parody warps as it intensifies an image, the religious metaphor was obviously not conceived by Alea as simple parody. Sebastian's mask is not a surrealistic disguise, nor is Alea's religious vehicle so shallow. The Count conducts an artificial and involuntary religious experiment, in which individual eruptions are also displaced. For example, Sebastian points the pig's head in an obvious accusation at the Count. But Sebastian's other role—that of Judas at the end of the table—promises that his fate will differ from the others'. His "betrayal" of the Count is a positive response in this inverted world. The Count, in turn, is apparently not a savior-figure despite his position in this *tableau vivant;* but he does represent the plight of the Christian faith staggering under the sophistication and inefficacy of eighteenth-century materialism and "enlightenment." Thus, Alea's metaphor has historical, not ideological, value, since the Count offers no salvation. Nor shall he be resurrected. By the end of supper, even he recognizes the imminent insurrection as he bids his servant, "No, don't send them away. Let them sleep. Let them never wake up."

According to the logic of the metaphor, Good Friday must bring a crucifixion. The death is not that of sacrifice, but instead, slaughter, as the slaves look to their own salvation. Don Manuel is taken hostage and eventually killed. We get repeated glimpses of him in the chaos of the courtyard, staggering under the weight of



THE LAST SUPPER ▶

stocks clamped around his neck. If his death atones for anyone, it is for the Count, who raises his hands in benediction: "A hand greater than mine shall save him." Later he asks, "What time did Christ die?", and is only too glad to relinquish his role to the dead Don Manuel. Riding out to the plantation, he discovers the slaves in rebellion and, in the scene described above, bares his head and his true interests.

In a sequence uncomfortably reminiscent of chase scenes in Westerns, a group of slaves actually run toward the Count's armed men for safety and are cut down on the path. This is, of course, the blood of martyrs. Henceforth, the metaphor gradually pivots to a complete indictment of Christian civilization. The Count takes on the aspect of the Grand Inquisitor as he views corpses stretched out in a chapel and finds two slaves among them. The priest tenders, "We are all equal in death." The Count subsequently spreads the equality around a bit and demands the heads of those who sat at his table. "Saturday" cuts across the screen and brings the persecution sequences.

As their host rushes to judgment, there is a certain irony in being judged by the company one kept. The brutal tricks reveal the sadism of the Count's hired killers. One figure remains beyond the clemency, grace or condemnation that the Count can bestow. Don Gaspar, the man who knows sugar, also seems to know a bit about humans. In such an archetypal situation, a characteristic expressed in one figure is unnecessary—even redundant—in another. Thus, Don Gaspar's knowledge is confined to him, extended from sugar to souls. When Don Gaspar had warned the Count against the Santo Domingo uprising, the Count had reminded him, "We know how to deal with our slaves." Sharp cut to Sebastian's ear being cut off—exactly the act that yields a Peter figure for the last supper, and in the final sequences, the figure whose escape is a promise for the future. Don Gaspar enables him to hide and flee when his house is searched, claiming to have seen nothing. With this lie, the myth of Peter's denial of Christ is transferred to Don Gaspar, Sebastian's savior. Alea has admitted that this character almost requires a new film: "His position is that of a person who has a secret, that is, a particular skill which he is able to sell to the Count and thus obtain a certain degree of freedom. As a salaried employee, he continues to be dependent on the property owner, but not to the same degree as the slaves. Coming from Haiti, he is more marked by French culture, by the ideas of the French Revolution. . . . His sense of justice was rather abstract, to say the least, but he was disturbed by the injustices he saw around him. . . . We had to reduce his importance within the film leaving him simply a spectator who is closer to us, the audience of the film." Don Gaspar's Cassandra-like prophecy is all too clear to the survivors of the French, American and Cuban revolutions.

The insurrection leaves Don Gaspar's melancholy ambivalence behind with the ochre tint of eighteenth-century oils. The martyrdoms have an entirely different visual impact, occurring in the gently dispersed light of virgin forests, sometimes with a blinding opaque whiteness as a transition between the man-hunt episodes. The repeated murders' logic lies only in the number of guests at the Count's dinner-dance, for the cinematic effect is one of repetition with slight variation until the act is freed from the plot. Stripped of its connotative associations, we do not see the significance of death—of either martyrdom or sacrifice, of a Christian or a Marxist unarmed struggle. We see light.

In the murder sequences Alea first taps interpretive montage, as in a cut from a shot of a fleeing slave to the exposed roots of a mammoth, uprooted tree trunk. But gradually the shimmer of forest green and the flowing camera movements of flight give way to a long, high shot of Calvary. This retreat to nature has functioned as a retreat from the religious metaphor and an affirmation of the pantheistic magic the slaves had attributed to Sebastian's having survived 100 lashes.

With somewhat comic effect, the title "Resurrection Sunday" opens to a shot of a hole in the ground. The camera pulls back to a cross being planted by the Count, encircled by eleven stakes crowned with the heads of the slain slaves. The twelfth stake, conspicuously empty, becomes larger as the camera dwells on it. The Christian paradox reaches its climax: Sunday was the day for resurrection, not for planting unoccupied

crucifixes. Thus, the final sequence of Sebastian in flight from the Count's perversion becomes a sequence of progress, reminiscent of Pudovkin's breaking ice in the montage of *Mother*. Here, Sebastian's flight is transformed from an image of escape to an image of unimpeded progress, by Alea's montage of running rivers, galloping horses, and the beauty of nature indomitable.

Alea's application of the Holy Week metaphor enlarges the Christian imagery and expectations enough to expose their current ideological flaws. Our expectation of a resurrection is rewarded by the insurrection of the slaves and by the promise of revolution inherent in Sebastian's repeated or "resurrected" attempt to run away. Finally, a few details deserve mention to illustrate Alea's contribution to the cinema beyond socialist Cuba. He has mastered the art of re-creating a historical atmosphere without confining it to the aestheticism of "period" movies. For example, the beating of a slave is not aestheticized by controlled color shots of spurting blood; rather, Alea uses a hand-held camera when the slaves are brutalized, encouraging our belief in its authenticity, because this style is typical of documentary footage of violence. In contrast, the creeping pans slow the tempo of the last supper to that of rigor mortis setting into its *naturaliza muerta*. Finally, because of dislocations and transferences in its ideology, the Christian framework deserves examination for its promised truth, which should reveal that we still carry a set of assumptions about Christian themes extending beyond the death of God or of Christian institutions. Tomas Gutiérrez Alea may well be the heir of Rossellini, not Buñuel. —KAREN JAEHNE

THE SHOUT

Direction: Jerzy Skolimowski. Script: Michael Austin and Skolimowski, from a story by Robert Graves. Photography: Mike Molloy. Music: Anthony Banks, Michael Rutherford and (electronic) Rupert Hine.

In the realm of reviewers' adjectives *The Shout* was not the most inventive, the most beautiful or the most crisply made entry in the last New York Film Festival, but I found it by far the most engrossing. This surprised me, since in the two of Skolimowski's previous films that I'd seen (*Bariera*, made in his native Poland, and *Le Départ*, made in Belgium) he had relied on the sixties theme of dissatisfied youth, dressing it up with some neat but obvious visual gimmickry. With *The Shout*, the theme has gone but gimmicks recur, some in almost identical form: a mirror on the street (as in both *Bariera* and *Départ*) and a stuffed chicken that is turned around to reveal the skeleton (in *Départ*, it was a rotating cutaway auto). Of course, since Skolimowski is working here in yet another foreign language, amid the temptation to shift his energies from unfamiliar words to familiar images, he may be praised for showing visual restraint. But negative virtues cannot account for the strong positive impression made by this film.

The search for an explanation led me much further than I expected. Though I began with the film's most obvious elements, I found myself drawn step by step beyond the normal confines of a review.

It is obvious, for example, that *The Shout* has the advantage of a photogenic setting (North Devon) and a good cast (Alan Bates, Susannah York, John Hurt), but these could hardly assure an engrossing film. Peter Handke, in his first directorial effort, *The Left-Handed Woman*, conjures up a fine study of the Paris *banlieue*—an area almost completely neglected by French film-makers—but ruins it with his continual straining after deadpan significance.

Skolimowski has an even bigger advantage in the story he chose to film. Also entitled "The Shout," it was written by Robert Graves in 1926. I first read it some 25 years ago, forgot all but a central image and wondered how on earth it could make a film. Rereading it after seeing the film, I find the answer simple. The story moves with deceptive ease through a pseudo-flashback structure that carries a large amount of terse but significant detail. Graves himself comments that he got the story published only after cutting it from 8,000 to 5,000 words.[1] It is already partway toward a "treatment," a dense outline that stands to gain rather than lose from the temporal and spatial expansion of filming. The basic structure, most of the incidents and much of the dialogue are preserved in the screenplay.

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crucifixes. Thus, the final sequence of Sebastian in flight from the Count's perversion becomes a sequence of progress, reminiscent of Pudovkin's breaking ice in the montage of *Mother*. Here, Sebastian's flight is transformed from an image of escape to an image of unimpeded progress, by Alea's montage of running rivers, galloping horses, and the beauty of nature indomitable.

Alea's application of the Holy Week metaphor enlarges the Christian imagery and expectations enough to expose their current ideological flaws. Our expectation of a resurrection is rewarded by the insurrection of the slaves and by the promise of revolution inherent in Sebastian's repeated or "resurrected" attempt to run away. Finally, a few details deserve mention to illustrate Alea's contribution to the cinema beyond socialist Cuba. He has mastered the art of re-creating a historical atmosphere without confining it to the aestheticism of "period" movies. For example, the beating of a slave is not aestheticized by controlled color shots of spurting blood; rather, Alea uses a hand-held camera when the slaves are brutalized, encouraging our belief in its authenticity, because this style is typical of documentary footage of violence. In contrast, the creeping pans slow the tempo of the last supper to that of rigor mortis setting into its *naturaliza muerta*. Finally, because of dislocations and transferences in its ideology, the Christian framework deserves examination for its promised truth, which should reveal that we still carry a set of assumptions about Christian themes extending beyond the death of God or of Christian institutions. Tomas Gutiérrez Alea may well be the heir of Rossellini, not Buñuel. —KAREN JAEHNE

THE SHOUT

Direction: Jerzy Skolimowski. Script: Michael Austin and Skolimowski, from a story by Robert Graves. Photography: Mike Molloy. Music: Anthony Banks, Michael Rutherford and (electronic) Rupert Hine.

In the realm of reviewers' adjectives *The Shout* was not the most inventive, the most beautiful or the most crisply made entry in the last New York Film Festival, but I found it by far the most engrossing. This surprised me, since in the two of Skolimowski's previous films that I'd seen (*Bariera*, made in his native Poland, and *Le Départ*, made in Belgium) he had relied on the sixties theme of dissatisfied youth, dressing it up with some neat but obvious visual gimmickry. With *The Shout*, the theme has gone but gimmicks recur, some in almost identical form: a mirror on the street (as in both *Bariera* and *Départ*) and a stuffed chicken that is turned around to reveal the skeleton (in *Départ*, it was a rotating cutaway auto). Of course, since Skolimowski is working here in yet another foreign language, amid the temptation to shift his energies from unfamiliar words to familiar images, he may be praised for showing visual restraint. But negative virtues cannot account for the strong positive impression made by this film.

The search for an explanation led me much further than I expected. Though I began with the film's most obvious elements, I found myself drawn step by step beyond the normal confines of a review.

It is obvious, for example, that *The Shout* has the advantage of a photogenic setting (North Devon) and a good cast (Alan Bates, Susannah York, John Hurt), but these could hardly assure an engrossing film. Peter Handke, in his first directorial effort, *The Left-Handed Woman*, conjures up a fine study of the Paris *banlieue*—an area almost completely neglected by French film-makers—but ruins it with his continual straining after deadpan significance.

Skolimowski has an even bigger advantage in the story he chose to film. Also entitled "The Shout," it was written by Robert Graves in 1926. I first read it some 25 years ago, forgot all but a central image and wondered how on earth it could make a film. Rereading it after seeing the film, I find the answer simple. The story moves with deceptive ease through a pseudo-flashback structure that carries a large amount of terse but significant detail. Graves himself comments that he got the story published only after cutting it from 8,000 to 5,000 words.[1] It is already partway toward a "treatment," a dense outline that stands to gain rather than lose from the temporal and spatial expansion of filming. The basic structure, most of the incidents and much of the dialogue are preserved in the screenplay.

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A cricket match is taking place at a private mental hospital between staff and patients on one team and residents of the nearby village on the other. A young man (the narrating "I" in the story; named Robert and reduced to third-person status in the film) acts as one of the scorekeepers; his opposite number is Charles Crossley (Alan Bates), an intelligent and well-educated patient who is under the delusion of being a multiple murderer. In the course of the cricket match Charles tells Robert what he asserts to be a true story (which I will call "C's story" to distinguish it from the whole). It concerns a young married couple, Anthony* (John Hurt), who is playing on the village team, and Rachel (Susannah York). One day in the village, Anthony is accosted by Charles (in Graves, C's story is narrated impersonally; the film, analogically, avoids subjective camerawork or voiceover narration). Charles, who appears to be a well-educated hobo, invites himself to lunch—and stays on. He claims to have lived for 20 years among Australian aborigines and to have learned much of their magic, including a lethal shout. When Anthony asks for a demonstration, Charles takes him out onto the dunes, and although Anthony puts wax in his ears the shout fells him (a nearby shepherd and his flock are killed). Touching one of a group of stones at the foot of the dune, Anthony suddenly thinks of himself as a cobbler; he later realizes that the stones represent the souls of the villagers. Meanwhile, Charles has cast a spell on Rachel, making her love him. Anthony returns to the dunes, finds Charles's soul-stone and smashes it. Charles collapses, his spell broken, just as police arrive to arrest him for multiple murder.

End of C's story; back to the cricket field. (Both Graves and Skolimowski have previously interrupted C's story with brief cutbacks to the match.) A thunderstorm breaks out, and patients start to run wild. Charles threatens to shout; a doctor enters the scoring box to pacify him as Robert leaves. Lightning strikes the box and kills both Charles and the doctor, who is found with a grimace of terror on his face and his fingers in his ears.

Both Graves's story and Skolimowski's film can be enjoyed simply as skillful pieces of naturalistic fantasy. The only element that does not work in the film so well as in the story is Anthony's discovery of the soul-stones: since their nature, in the absence of Graves's description, is not easily grasped, they throw a gratuitously bizarre light on C's story and his mental condition. On the other hand, the cricket setting works much better in the film, where even the briefest cutback presents the viewer with the full ironic contrast between the game code that more or less unites the players and the urgent private codes that compel some of them to run amuck.

The film makes three significant additions to Graves. Two of them concern the role of Anthony in C's story: from Graves's brief reference to him as a musician, Skolimowski and coscenarist Austin have developed scenes that show him creating music with synthesizer, tape and other electronic equipment, as well as playing the organ for the village church; they have also given him a somewhat perfunctory affair with the village cobbler's wife. These additions serve to sharpen the contrast between Anthony and Charles, with results that I will discuss shortly. The third addition affects the frame of events around C's story. In Graves, the narrating "I" states at the end that neither Anthony nor Rachel knew Charles personally—which hedges C's story with a kind of objective truth *à la Caligari* and leaves the dubious circumstances of the doctor's death only as a conventional teaser. Skolimowski omits the "objective" statement and adds a frame of his own, in which Rachel runs into the hospital with the apparent intention of viewing Charles's body.

This inconclusive ending directs attention back onto C's story, where a closer look at the contrast between Anthony and Charles reveals a set of neat oppositions: Anthony is an *homme moyen sensuel,* enjoying momentary satisfactions and leaning on the technological crutches of industrialized society. No systematic beliefs or ideals seem to sustain his work or his life; he is an empiricist. Faced with any difficulty, he tends to be weak and indecisive. Charles on the other hand attaches no importance to comfort, money or technology. His actions seem guided by a central belief or ideal. He displays composure and moral strength.

Even before Charles's collapse at the end of his story, flaws appear in this dichotomy. Anthony

*Named Richard in Graves. I refer to him as Anthony in both story and film.

and Rachel have a shared dream about an aboriginal shaman on the dunes—a visionary touch to which Anthony hardly seems entitled. Charles, on the other hand, has no compunction about using his magical powers to seduce Rachel; and he warns Anthony to keep away or else "I'll shout the ears off your head"—a comically clumsy threat, especially with Rachel in earshot.

There's no apparent mystery about these inconsistencies. Near the end of Graves's story, Charles suddenly trembles and says, "I'm [Anthony] now, and Crossley will kill me"; but even without this hint the viewer can realize that Charles's presentation of Anthony does not come from a detached observer: he is trying to project his own weaknesses onto Anthony while reserving all possible strengths for himself. The oppositions of Anthony and Charles in C's story belong to just *one* man.

The film stresses certain elements in Graves which seem to invite a psychoanalytic interpretation, notably Charles's desire for Rachel and his antipathy to Anthony. It's easy to surmise that they stand for his parents, and if he shouted Father to death (an apt revenge for the common paternal sin of shouting at one's son) he could enjoy Mother all by himself. (In the film's "real" world, the doctor—who does die at the end, possibly as Charles shouts—makes an even more plausible father figure.) At the same time, guilt at wishing Father dead drives Charles to accuse himself of murder.

The psychoanalytic parallel could be extended further, but to little purpose. If *The Shout* yielded nothing more than secondhand Freud it would hardly be an engrossing film. In any case, Graves would rather see goddesses than complexes at work on the human psyche: in his introduction to *The Greek Myths*[2] he tosses a few barbs at both Freud and Jung and insists on the historical origins of mythology in the shift from matriarchal to patriarchal society. Skolimowski, in self-exile from socialist Poland, is even more likely to view conflicts in political rather than psychoanalytical terms.

Sure enough, the film lends itself readily to interpretation as a parable about Marxist revolution—a double parable, in fact. If C's story is taken at face value, Anthony embodies the evils of the bourgeoisie: he toys with art, lives at a remove from society (the cottage is isolated on the moors) except when supporting repressive institutions (playing the organ for the church), is self-indulgent and individualistic. Charles, by contrast, has broken with his bourgeois background (having spent years among victims of colonialist repression) and spurns its blandishments; he is a revolutionary prepared to use violence (the shout—an imaginative symbol on the lines of Dovzhenko's talking horse or unkillable Red soldier). Although Charles is the stronger, Anthony tricks him and breaks his soul-stone (divides and conquers the proletariat). Charles is placed behind bars. But the shout remains. . . .

If C's story is taken as self-serving propaganda, the same basic events appear in a different light. Charles's characterization of Anthony becomes problematic, and so does his claim to have broken with bourgeois culture: in any case, he seems to be using his revolutionary power for his own benefit (simply taking Anthony's place in bed and at board) rather than for that of his adopted class (of which he carelessly kills one member, the shepherd). He is placed behind bars, as a menace not just to society but to the people.

Like the Freudian interpretation, this parable is at most a tributary to the film's current of meaning. It goes further, but not far enough to explain why the film is engrossing: though it offers two alternative views of events instead of just one, it places them in a static context. Both the Freudian and the political interpretations overlook a brief but crucial element in the film: the dynamic role played by Rachel.

While she figures as little more than a pawn (or the stake) in the contest between Charles and Anthony, Rachel dominates the opening and closing scenes—to far-reaching effect. In the closing scene, Skolimowski does not even reveal which of the dead bodies Rachel has come to view, thus raising the possibility that her concern is with neither Anthony nor Charles but with the doctor (as family friend, lover or therapist). Moreover, although her rapid entry into the hospital suggests strong emotion, its nature is never specified: the viewer cannot tell whether she is shattered, sad, incredulous, angry or relieved. In short, the outer frame not only leaves the truth of C's story up in the air but it also raises uncertainties *outside* the conflict between Anthony and Charles.

Unlike the many films that derive a facile ambiguity from a scene tacked on (or withheld) at

the end, *The Shout* is strengthened and in a sense completed by its outer frame. Instead of leaving the viewer with two conflicting levels of reality (C's story and the cricket match), Rachel's frame adds a third conflicting level that closes back on itself to give the film a dynamic circular structure —like the three-legged emblem known as a triskelion.

This structure is integral to the film, being founded not only on narrative events but also on specific attributes of the medium. Film imagery can be analyzed into three phenomenological levels: (1) unorganized grains of light and dark (or varying light wavelengths) within the individual frame; (2) the organized static image formed by the whole individual frame; (3) the organized moving image formed by a series of frames. I refer to these as "levels" since they are usually thought of as a hierarchy: Eco, for example, makes this assumption when he suggests that the film is a triply articulated semiotic in which meaning is conveyed only on the third level (the moving image).[3] In practice, however, all three levels may and often do have equal semiotic force: avant-garde films such as George Landow's *Bardo Follies* or Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* make almost exclusive use of the first level, while Chris Marker's *La Jetée* and Morgan Fisher's *The Phi Phenomenon* rely heavily on the second.* Even in the most popular narrative films, the use of fades, dissolves, whiteouts, blur-outs and freeze frames assure the first and second levels of a place in the semiotic lexicon.

In *The Shout*, each of the three narrative segments is associated with one of the three image levels, either directly or by analogy or both:

• C's story opens with grainy, blurred images—Anthony's and Rachel's shared dream of the Australian medicine man wandering through the dunes. The story also has equivalents of this first-level randomness in its content: Charles's assertions continually refer back to a "primitive" way of life and are alien to a commonsense view of reality; they cannot be verified or explained in everyday terms. However, the assertions *can* be challenged from that everyday plane—and this happens when Anthony, applying normal logic to preposterous data, smashes Charles's soulstone and causes his downfall. With this act, the focus shifts from the first level to the second, that of the static image.

• The framing scenes of the cricket match represent this second level. Inanimate objects loom large in it: wickets and other paraphernalia of the game; the two trees which, for the doctor, illustrate the difference between mental illness and health. The human figures are largely immobilized: the defending team fixed to assigned places on the field, the spectators slumped in deck chairs or on the grass, Charles and Robert immured in the scoring box. The movements even of the active players—such as Anthony at bat—neither sweep out of frame nor require the camera to pan. And the cricket scenes offer no dramatic development (we don't even know which team is winning) until the very end. Then this level in turn is challenged by another: movement and change irrupt with the thunderstorm and the problematic deaths of Charles and the doctor.

• The brief outer frame of Rachel entering the hospital brings this third-level movement into the forefront. To begin with, it is raining (vertical movement which fills the frame). In each scene, Rachel moves steadily from left to right across a still background that accentuates her horizontal progress. Moreover, the two parts into which the outer frame is divided bear a similar relation to that of two successive images in a shot: by repeating some of the action from the opening of the film, the closing sequence offers an analogy of the persistence of vision that "creates" continuous movement. At the end of the closing scene, however, Rachel comes to a halt in front of one of the bodies, her form merges partly into the shadowy background, and then the fadeout returns the film to the first level. Analogically, as the scene ends before resolving the contradictions between C's story and the cricket sequence, the film's third level succumbs to the prelogical randomness of the first (which makes it, contrary to Eco's hypothesis, the least communicative of the three). Thus the three dramatic levels and the three image levels together come full circle.

**Bardo Follies* consists for the most part of greatly magnified (and unidentifiable) sections of color images. *The Flicker* uses nothing but all-black and all-white frames. Except in one scene, all movement in *La Jetée* is frozen. *The Phi Phenomenon* involves a single fixed view of a wall clock.

This duplication of structure could, of course, have made for boredom rather than excitement. However, the particular structure involved—the triskelion, or recurring three-stage cycle—undoubtedly helped to tip the scale. No anthropological digression is needed to show how frequently humans have conceived their deepest beliefs and highest aspirations in the form of cycles (Hindu cosmogony, the expanding and contracting universe, etc.) or in sets of three (the Fates, the Trinity, etc.). At the same time, the fascination of *The Shout* also depends on what is being structured.

Two legs of the triskelion—those associated with Charles and Anthony—represent a particular kind of opposition that underlies almost any field of human dispute, from attitudes to work and leisure to the meaning of life. In the two areas of interpretation mentioned earlier—psychoanalysis and politics—this opposition takes the form of Freud's pleasure *vs.* reality principles and of revolutionary *vs.* conservative. In philosophy, it recurs from age to age in the division between Plato and Heraclitus, realists and nominalists, rationalists and positivists, and many others.

A film that evokes such far-reaching connections runs the risk of pretentiousness, but Skolimowski avoids this pitfall by emphasizing the negative aspects of the polarity. He makes his antagonists display less of the high principles and more of the weaknesses and excesses that may afflict—or be imputed to—their counterparts. Thus Anthony (on the reality/conservative/nominalist side) is presented in C's story as narrow, trivial and self-centered; Charles (on the opposite side) is presented in the cricket scenes as losing touch with reality. It is a truism to say that this great family of oppositions cannot finally be resolved, but Skolimowski brings the truism to life by showing that Anthony's victory over Charles stems from luck rather than superior principle, from desperation rather than preparation. Even among titans, the battle could not continue forever at the same high level of determination. It would break down into skirmishes, shift from ground to ground, lose old antagonists and gain new ones, involve temporary victories, standoffs and truces.

This dynamic view, implicit in C's story and the cricket sequence, is confirmed by the third leg of the triskelion—the outer frame. Here, Rachel's concern, whether with Charles's or the doctor's death, bears little relation to what is shown of her behavior in C's story or (briefly) in the cricket scenes, and it seems likely to disconcert the temporary victor of the contest, Anthony. She has already moved on from that skirmish: she may have changed sides, or developed new arguments, or be shifting from the ascetic/sensual, "primitive"/"civilized" ground on which Charles and Anthony fought to some other zone of the opposition. Or she may be denying that the skirmish ever took place. Either way, thesis and antithesis lead not to synthesis but to a new set of circumstances, where the struggle will resume with different weapons and a different balance of forces.

To sum up so far: the dramatic structure of *The Shout* coincides not only with elemental human patterns (the circle, the group of three) but also with the phenomenological division of film imagery; the intensity of these combined forces sparks a connection between the specific encounter of Anthony and Charles and a general field of human conflict.

Though this may seem ambitious enough, it still does not account for the full fascination of *The Shout.* As the title might suggest, the use of sound also plays an important role—and it is one that does *not* repeat the pattern of the imagery. In theory, the sound track could also be divided into three phenomenological levels: unorganized sound (noise), a steady frequency or set of frequencies (single tone or tonal complex) and a modulated sequence (speech, music). Unlike the image strip, however, the sound track involves no structural distinction between one level and another—in fact, the three classes of sound from which it is conventionally mixed cut across the three phenomenological levels (the dialogue track includes coughs, snickers, humming, etc. in addition to speech; the music, sustained frequencies and percussive noises; the sound effects, modulated frequencies such as door chimes and bird songs). I suspect it would have been difficult for Skolimowski to have engineered an aural triskelion even if he had wanted to.

Here I must make a brief and tentative foray into largely unexplored territory—the aesthetics

of film sound. It seems that the absolute quality of a sound carries less significance than its quantitative values (dynamics, tempo), which in turn carry less than its context (relation to adjacent sounds and/or images). I derive this impression from avant-garde films, very few of which experiment with sound quality; and in those that do, the context also undergoes extensive manipulation.* In several other avant-garde films, unusual effects stem almost entirely from the displacement of conventional sounds: for example, the staggered commentary in Hollis Frampton's *Nostalgia;* the out-of-phase dialogue in George Landow's *No Sir. Orison;* or the shuffling of speech, song and natural sound segments in Larry Gottheim's *Mouches Volantes.* Most relevant to the use of sound in *The Shout* is Dana Hodgdon's *A Prepared Text:* from a single sync shot of himself explaining the film's strategy, Hodgdon edits out all sections of the sound track (and corresponding image strip) that contain such adventitious vocalizations as "uh" and throat clearing, and splices them together after the "purified" speech. As a result of this sound-based editing, noises that are taken for granted in their normal context join forces to create a bizarre nonhuman performance.

The effect is similar to that of the most prominent displacement of sound in Skolimowski's film, the shout itself. Since it consists of a rising multi-frequency electronic whine, whose impact seems at first to depend only on its intensity, the strategy may be dismissed as conventional. (Ever since *Bells of Atlantis* in 1952, too many filmmakers have turned to electronic synthesis for a short cut to the eerie.) But context makes the shout effective. Previously, the viewer has seen Anthony experimenting with sounds in his studio: the amplified and distorted buzz of a bee trapped in a jar, a bow drawn across an empty sardine can, and so on. With the shout, the same kind of sound that came from Anthony's machines now issues directly, disturbingly, from a human mouth.

While the image structure of *The Shout* underlines the opposition between Charles and Anthony, the use of sound brings them closer together. For one thing, it points to their complementary inconsistencies. As an *homme moyen sensuel* with no evident convictions, Anthony enjoys experimenting with sounds for their own sake; yet he also plays the organ for the village church. Charles, whose shout represents the force of his shamanism, often lets his voice slip into flippant inflections when talking with Anthony and Rachel.

More important, the sound track reveals what the two men have in common. Long before demonstrating the shout, Charles has shown that he too is a manipulator of sounds like Anthony: at the first meal with Anthony and Rachel he rubs his finger ringingly around a wine glass. It is not only as a contender for Rachel but also as a rival "composer" that he tells Anthony, after hearing the latter at work, "You understand nothing outside your experience." Conversely, the first appearance of Anthony in the cricket sequence coincides with a roaring whine that turns out to come from a motorbike but which, for a few seconds, gives a startling foretaste of Charles's shout.

The oddest way in which the sound track brackets Charles and Anthony together is in making them both seem equally real and unreal. In C's story, by far the longest of the film's three segments, Skolimowski uses a full range of naturalistic sound effects and speech to create a circumstantial background of reality. (In films with visions, dreams, hallucinations and the like, the image may remain normal but the sound track invariably cues the shift of mode by means of echoes, amplifications, distortions, or unexpected silence.) The other two segments, of course, throw doubt on the reality of C's story, but they do not disprove it; most significantly, Anthony never says a word that would reveal his "true" manner of speech. As a result, the Charles and Anthony of C's story come to share a dual nature: they are individual men *and* two sides of Charles at one and the same time.

Seen—or rather, heard—in this way, the film suggests that the Anthony and Charles of C's story might have been able to find a *modus vivendi,* combining their opposed forces instead of directing them against each other. Rachel in the outer

*In Paul Sharits's *T.O.U.C.H.I.N.G.* the shaving away of the terminal phones of the spoken word "destroy" is combined with rhythmic repetition. The white noise that Peter Kubelka uses for the sound track of *Arnulf Rainer* is intercut with silence in complex rhythmic patterns.

frame may be regretful or angry not simply at Charles's death but at the lost opportunity. Of course, it may be argued that such antagonists could not work together anyway; or that if they did, one of them would—in effect if not in appearance—have to surrender to the other. This means that the new reading does not efface the earlier one but adds a fresh set of oppositions to the list: absolutism vs. relativism and determinism vs. probabilism.

At this point *The Shout* is caught up in its own triskelion. Is it a serious film that was intended to carry the weight of interpretation I have loaded onto it? Or is it an entertaining commercial film that plays, like Anthony, with serious-looking (and -sounding) elements? Or is it a serendipitous mixture of the two?

I opt for the last. The film's casting, setting and photography, and its touches of sex, satire and exoticism mark the distance that Skolimowski went to meet commercial requirements, while the skillful adaptation of Graves, the balance of sympathy between Charles and Anthony, and the obscure ending reveal a strong undertow of non-commercial intent (strong enough, at this writing, to have denied the film a US distributor). It is probably a matter of luck that this dual approach happens to match the oppositions between C's story and the cricket sequence, and that *this luck itself* plays the role of the third segment (Rachel's frame), propelling the viewer's judgment of the film around a fascinating cycle of uncertainty.

It may also be luck that the fabric of the sound film—three phenomenological levels of imagery intersected by indeterminate contexts of sound—matches the dramatic cross-currents of *The Shout*; but if so, it is luck of a different kind, a resource that the maker of any complex narrative film must be able to tap. Makers of non-narrative films have the option of increasing control over their material to any desired extent by reducing its complexity (for example, to all-black and all-white images, and to all noise and all silence, as in *Arnulf Rainer*). But the maker of a film like *The Shout* has somehow to organize all the multifarious interactions of image, sound and content that baffle conscious preprogramming. Whatever the resource behind that "somehow," Skolimowski has at last tapped it. —WILLIAM JOHNSON

NOTES

1. *Occupation Writer*, by Robert Graves (New York, 1950, contains "The Shout" and the author's comments on it.
2. *The Greek Myths*, by Robert Graves (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1955).
3. *Theory of Semiotics*, by Umberto Eco (Bloomington & London, 1976).

DESPAIR

Director: Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Photography: Michael Ballhaus. Script: Tom Stoppard. Based on the novel Otchayanie (Despair) **by Vladimir Nabakov. Produced in West Germany and France by PCNF Geria/Bavaria (Munich) and SFP (Paris). 1978.**

A Russian émigré, now a chocolate manufacturer (Dirk Bogarde at the peak of his powers), Hermann Hermann lives in Berlin in 1930, longs for homeland, abjures politics, loves his heavy, pretty, foolish wife Lydia (Andrea Ferreol), and develops increasing anxiety at the rise of National Socialism and the fall of the international market due to Wall Street's collapse. "Was anyone injured?" Lydia chirrups.

Their lovemaking carries pronounced overtones of male fantasy, she characteristically nude, he dressed, sometimes to the hilt. Then Hermann begins to envision himself, distanced down a long hallway, observer to the sex. Alternately he studies the coupling, and, as the bedded lover, watches himself seated. Next, evidence that Lydia enjoys a liaison with her cousin Ardalion (Volker Spengler), a terrible painter, becomes impossible to ignore.

Hermann travels to Düsseldorf to effect a merger ("A murder?" Lydia asks). There he meets Felix Weber (Klaus Lowitsch), an itinerant whose resemblance to himself Hermann considers remarkable. No one else, ourselves included, will ever remark any likeness at all. As he grows more demented, Hermann concocts and executes a scheme in which he pretends to being blackmailed, exchanges clothing with Felix, kills him, flees to Switzerland in the new identity and faces rapid capture, desperately inventing more elaborately hermetic fantasies to escape inexorable reality.

Nabokov's novel appeared in 1936, written during the author's own German exile. Of all the books from this period it is Nabokov's least political; indeed Hermann (Hermann Karlovich in the

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A Russian émigré, now a chocolate manufacturer (Dirk Bogarde at the peak of his powers), Hermann Hermann lives in Berlin in 1930, longs for homeland, abjures politics, loves his heavy, pretty, foolish wife Lydia (Andrea Ferreol), and develops increasing anxiety at the rise of National Socialism and the fall of the international market due to Wall Street's collapse. "Was anyone injured?" Lydia chirrups.

Their lovemaking carries pronounced overtones of male fantasy, she characteristically nude, he dressed, sometimes to the hilt. Then Hermann begins to envision himself, distanced down a long hallway, observer to the sex. Alternately he studies the coupling, and, as the bedded lover, watches himself seated. Next, evidence that Lydia enjoys a liaison with her cousin Ardalion (Volker Spengler), a terrible painter, becomes impossible to ignore.

Hermann travels to Düsseldorf to effect a merger ("A murder?" Lydia asks). There he meets Felix Weber (Klaus Lowitsch), an itinerant whose resemblance to himself Hermann considers remarkable. No one else, ourselves included, will ever remark any likeness at all. As he grows more demented, Hermann concocts and executes a scheme in which he pretends to being blackmailed, exchanges clothing with Felix, kills him, flees to Switzerland in the new identity and faces rapid capture, desperately inventing more elaborately hermetic fantasies to escape inexorable reality.

Nabokov's novel appeared in 1936, written during the author's own German exile. Of all the books from this period it is Nabokov's least political; indeed Hermann (Hermann Karlovich in the

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novel), whom Nabokov gleefully despises, is made a vaguely Communist bourgeois, as if to ridicule his indiscriminate notions about human interchangeability. The book parodies *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikoff/Hermann the amoral figure, as well as detective stories. Hermann's perfect crime is one in which the murderer is the victim.

If doubling (Dostoyevsky again, and German Gothic) underlies Nabokov's book, his use of it is whimsically perverse. For open satire of the döppelgänger one must look to Hermann's namesake Humbert Humbert and Clare Quilty, who come much later. Rather *Despair* invents an act of demented disassociation with which the audience cannot itself become complicitly engaged because the narrative mode is not expressionistic. Instead, it is overlaid by self-reflexive irony upon irony. The book is written as a memoir-diary: "the lowest form of literature," its author says. Rereading, the writer discovers his fatal mistake in commission of the perfect crime.

Nabokov's plot intact, Stoppard and Fassbinder have enlarged the döppelgänger motif (including plays on old movie scenes), politicized time and place, and exteriorized Hermann's aberrations by means of fantasized, conjectural intrusions.

Doubling, of course, here advances double narrative functions: the visual evidence of Hermann's disassociation during his lovemaking, shared by ourselves through either party's eyes, and the satirized Felix-double, authenticated by the protagonist alone. As a self-conscious design it is foregrounded during an episode when Ardalion, Lydia and Hermann attend a movie, a made-up American silent with funny German intertitles about twin brothers, one a murderer under seige from cops led by his brother. The fraternal policeman goes inside to talk. The criminal kills him, changes clothes, tries to escape and is shot down. When both men are on screen together, Hermann explains to his seatmates, you can always see a line running down the middle of the frame.

The sequence rather obviously predicts what ensues, but it also encourages a welter of speculation from anyone who is Jacques Lacan-disposed. With Hermann viewing his own primal scene, the audience as concurrent witness, the film has thus far been operating already in a kind of quadroscopic realm of voyeuristic permutations. Henceforth, the reflexive nudge of movie-within-movie complicates matters yet again, however ironically, its intentions underlined by Hermann himself, who once pretends to be a film director needing a double for his new production; he is trying to persuade Felix to work for him.

Politics prove to be less skillfully insinuated. Where the novel was denuded of topicality but for its satiric Bolshevism, the film plants depression brownshirts, reparations, Versailles, and anti-Semitism with stolid good intention. The effect is rather as if Nabokov and Christopher Isherwood had been assigned by Alexander Korda to collaborate on a film biography of George Grosz, a venture that could have amused but would hardly have satisfied either. In one sequence, seated at a sidewalk cafe, Hermann watches a group of young Nazi thugs throw bricks through the windows of a Jewish butcher shop. Then he studies two bearded Jews playing chess at a nearby table, determinedly oblivious to the incident. Clearly, we are led to believe, this experience triggers Hermann's insane plan for escape.

Hermann's surfacing madness erupts in dream sequences as well as in evocations of old movie comments. A confrontation between Hermann and Felix is shot in a small, dark room, light jostled between them from a swinging, suspended, shaded lamp, like Dorian Gray and Lord Henry Wotton. We *know* you destroy yourself if you destroy your mirror image. A later, hallucinated

DESPAIR ▶

moment anticipating the murder of Felix has Hermann shooting his pistol into a nexus of reflections, just like Everett Sloane and Rita Hayworth in *The Lady From Shanghai.*

Repetitively introduced to the point of humor is the staging of automobile passes, right to left at midground, blocking actors from spectators, as if Fassbinder could not resist designating a convention of historic recreation. Some music (by Peer Raben) struck this viewer as tongue-in-cheek Miklos Rosza *Spellbound*; perhaps such apparent nuances only amount to one spectator's willful free associations when parody runs rampant. The period cars could as easily be perceived as obsessive spatial reenactments, like the opening and closing of doors in Fassbinder's *Chinese Roulette* (1976).

The director's, writer's and actors' triumph in *Despair* has been to translate Nabokov's largely conversationless world into a glittering mire of snobbish puns and monologues. Who is audacious enough to conjecture how Nabokov might have viewed such extensions of himself? Apparently he did enjoy the ping pong game in Kubrick's *Lolita.* Of Lydia he ought to applaud, "Intelligence would take the bloom off your carnality." And "But you are only half-dressed! Off with it! Have you no sense of indecency?" Nabokov *might* have accepted, "But the National Socialists oppose both the Nationalists and the Socialists. And the People's Party is against the People."

If hardly discontinuous from earlier Fassbinder work, *Despair*'s language shift, its concentration on a non-German experience, albeit one in Germany, separates the title from other recent productions, at least in terms of ideological preoccupations. Formally, *Despair* shares some of the ritualized lateral and circling camera tracks that figure so strongly in *Chinese Roulette.* Like *Satan's Brew* (1976), too, supportive characters withdraw from the protagonist's emotional displays into their own madnesses and normalities. The central figure in *Satan's Brew* is a radical, competitive poet who comes to believe himself the reincarnation of a long dead conservative writer, Stefan George. Except for a few excessive indulgences, he loses touch with his surroundings, and the alienation is evidenced by veering interchanges, dialogues at odd cross purposes, like apparent intersections that actually fail to occupy the same space: three-dimensional chess on a two-dimensional chessboard.

Similarly, Hermann's mania usually fails to trigger responses, even in moments of hysteria. Thus, for the viewer Hermann's motives are clothed in ambiguities that lend a texture of alternatives as the narrative unfolds. For example, he rushes to cousin Ardalion's studio, there to find his wife in her underwear and the painter nearly naked. "She was feeling sick," Ardalion mutters desperately. But Hermann's only interest is in re-viewing a terrible still life of two roses and a pipe. The canvas is located, its back scrawled by some child with a swastika. Ardalion immediately offers to sell it to Hermann. "Ah," Hermann sighs, "It's as dreadful as I remember." He then considers a portrait Ardalion has painted of him. The scene can be read as (1) a momentary, bizarre obsession; (2) Hermann's willful blindness to his wife's infidelity, like the Jews at chess; (3) an effort to reaffirm Ardalion's painting as so bad that no one could establish the actual identity of Felix through the portrait's unlikeness to the double. Together, all might be true, but if (3) is at play, then Hermann, at least momentarily, has been alert enough to suspect the symmetry of his vagabond mirror image: an instant of sane self-doubt that is immediately reabsorbed in the snobberies of his customary human relationships. "The artist perceives the difference between things. It is the vulgar who note their resemblances," Ardalion advises Hermann in Nabakov's book.

Throughout his career, Nabokov played with movie images and expository gimmicks; see Alfred Appel's *Nabokov's Dark Cinema* (New York: Oxford, 1974) for many examples. The diarist of *Despair,* for one, poses, then rejects a notion of falling back stylistically on parallel editing, "the darling of the old Kinematograph." It is not in any so direct a manner that Nabokov has had his way with Fassbinder's film. *Despair* was his first venture at English prose; Nabokov undertook the translation himself. The old Russian's 1978 triumph has been to impose his ironic, black wit with so assertive a vision, in posthumous collusion with a West German directing his first English language production and a Czech-English playright.

—JOHN L. FELL

Books

AMERICAN SILENT FILM

By William K. Everson. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

THE WAR, THE WEST, AND THE WILDERNESS

By Kevin Brownlow. New York: Knopf, 1979.

Like the Western, movie history has its ups and downs. Early on the product of journalists (Terry Ramsaye), young fans (Paul Rotha), and film-makers (Lewis Jacobs), the field now extends from nostalgia and hard cover fanzines into scrupulous, mirthless academe.

For some writers, and William Everson is one, method-prone scholarship poses about as many dangers as celulose nitrate stock, for in part the cost of legitimizing film study has required distinguishing, as it were, Film History from Film Appreciation. Early film history survived on, indeed required, first-hand memories, rarely replicated by readers. Things are somewhat different now. In Fall, 1977, a group assembled at the Museum of Modern Art to view fiction, i.e. staged, 1900-1906 footage, sources mostly limited to Edison and American Mutoscope and Biograph. Four teams continuously viewed different titles through the course of a week. Even then, the project was only barely completed. However much early material remains forever lost, an astonishing amount has resurfaced, accessible to a persevering, politic student.

Today a central classroom preoccupation is the effort to impose something approaching analytic methodology on kicking, screaming reels of old movies which hardly consider themselves corpses. The campaign has assumed two forms, one a developing emphasis on conditions of production and consumption, a search for social, political, and cultural causality, whether the means of attribution be Marxist, neoclassical, or alternative modes of economic thinking. Such a strategy has been sustained by mounting support for what is sometimes rather vaguely described as ideological analysis. Its bête noir is Romantic Idealism—the practice of writers who promulgate personal appraisal of individual works. To the historian-professor, such texts inexorably jell into a mere arbitrary succession of screen events, supposedly created by heroic individual artistry, strung together in isolation from the muck of commerce.

The other prongs of academic attack have been hated semiology and structuralism. To a great extent either approach confirms the other, for semiology equally proclaims disinterest in aesthetics, in distinguishing works one from another through notions of quality. Not What It Means but How It Means. From such a viewpoint what we have considered film history until now threatens to dissolve into nothing but a puddle of anecdotes and descriptions. In both the opacity of its prose and the shrill sternness of its rhetoric, this is the real semiotic beast in the jungle, a monster that regards no film as anything more than a new cryptographic challenge.

The situation of film history is further distended now by time itself. New generations of cinéastes predictably arrive, regularly ignorant of an enlarging past. If, as Godard said in the fifties, his was the first generation of film-makers equipped to operate within a celluloid tradition, perhaps it will now be revealed to have been the last. The class of 1980 is largely unfamiliar with Godard. His movies haven't played the theaters for years, and they aren't shown on television.

In such contexts, William Everson's *American Silent Film* serves many purposes and contradicts others. Everson's credentials as teacher, consultant, author, distributor, and exhibitor are impressively authentic. He has seen, described, and often discovered so many early films that those of us who hold such activity in respect find ourselves only in his debt. To cite a single instance, Buster Keaton's *Le Roi des Champs Elysées*, made in 1934, was never brought to this country until Everson toured with it a few years ago.

Often Everson describes sequences and incidents with refreshing clarity, as in his chapter on comedy. Material on production design evidentially supports a recurrent argument that late silent film compensated its slower pace with much greater visual detail. A chapter on intertitles

thoughtfully distinguishes kinds of employments which show the printed material to be potentially quite as distinctive as its surrounding live action. Clearly Everson loves silent film. His enthusiasms support a writing style impelled to share the pleasures; the affection promotes a thicket of citations.

This is the positive side of Everson's book, abetted by handsome illustratons, appendicized guides to archives and rentals, and a chronology of silent highlights. The text itself evolves from early history and Griffith to year-to-year recitations (1919–1922), and chapters on directors, the western, more catch-all genres, female stars, and finally the transition to sound.

In other respects, *American Silent Film* proves to be less satisfactory. Often because of the sheer weight of titles, but also as a consequence of no more explicit technique than personal appraisal, many citations are relegated to a nether world of descriptive phrase. Thus *Show People* (1928) is "clumsy and blunted, much less effective than Victor Fleming's *Bombshell* (1933)" (p. 206). *Chip of the Flying U* and *In the Days of the Thundering Herd* "stand out among the more ambitious features" (p. 243). *Doubling for Romeo* is "curiously another satire of the movies . . . subtler, gentler than the Sennett film, but no less biting" (p. 172). The frames of reference for other appraisals may strike a reader as cursory: "the literary fatalism of Jean Paul Sartre and his existentialist philosophy dominated so much of the French cinema in the immediate post-World War II period" (pp. 167–168).

No book of such scope can avoid errors of fact. *Gertie the Trained Dinosaur* is customarily dated these days anywhere from 1911 to 1914. Everson's sequence of sentences leads one to believe that Max Fleischer was responsible for Felix the Cat, rather than Pat Sullivan, its producer, and Otto Messmer, its creator (p. 210). Gaston Leroux's *Phantom of the Opera* (American edition 1911) is hardly a gothic novel (p. 220). *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* is, of course, Edison, not Biograph (p. 261). *Grass* is described as documenting "Lapland tribes, perpetually nomadic as they move with their reindeer herds" (p. 235). One might well disagree with the proposition that Pudovkin's *Mother* copied the ice flow sequence out of *Way Down East* " so carefully that it is impossible to determine whether certain scenes might have been duped" (p. 158).

American Silent Film devotes a chapter to "The Birth of Film Grammar," and it is unfortunate that Everson restricts his attention to Edwin S. Porter and Griffith, for such an overview continues to leave students unaware of narrative film's fascinating, step-by-step evolution of expository technique in the early years of the century, often the work of other men and many times anonymous, often stemming from foreign film companies too. Certainly this is one place where Everson's familiarity with early material might importantly have contributed to the field by way of a coherent, ordered examination of relevant sources.

Everson's pleasures rest largely with studio productions. *The Vanishing American* (1925), for example, rates two parenthetical remarks. In Kevin Brownlow's *The War, the West, and the Wilderness* the same film receives four pages and three stills. Brownlow's exceptional book explores little-known territories of early movie history with such diligence, enthusiasm, and success that it promises immediately to assume the status and provide the utility of *The Parade's Gone By*, the author's earlier gift to film scholars.

Brownlow's focus of energy centers on the movie camera's relation not to sets but to natural environments, grouped as his title suggests. Such a strategy neatly bypasses customary squabbling between story film and documentary, just as it stubbornly confronts contemporary notions that the screen's information is no more trustworthy than its conditions of cultural perception (Godard: not the image of the reality but the reality of the image). Film's employment as historical evidence is redefined here to force the spectator into less accustomed ways of viewing the past. We must simply learn to understand what particular kind of history has been preserved.* Once a cameraman for Hal Roach, George Stevens commented that when he looked at the silent shorts in later years, he could only think about

*A recent, fascinating survey by I.C. Jarvie supports much the same notion. "Seeing Through the Movies," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences 8* pp. 374–397.

all that Southern California real estate in the backgrounds.

Brownlow's affection for photography's specificities permeates his study, just as the book's wealth of illustrations, beautifully reproduced (sometimes in double-page detail) supports the text: a World War I cameraman before a bombed-out rural chapel, Tom Mix and cowboys around the chuckwagon, Karl Brown lighting *Stark Love* (1927) with acetylene torches in the Smokies. *Stark Love* is the kind of film that fits *The War, The West, and the Wilderness.* Other kinds of "histories" simply cannot accommodate it.

Like Everson, Brownlow deserves special accolade for rediscovering lost treasures. He found *With Lawrence in Arabia* in the Imperial War Museum. Spurred by Everson's own three reels of *The Silent Enemy*, Brownlow pressed David Shepard, then with the AFI, to rescue a complete, tinted, nitrate print from Paramount vaults. Fortunately, Brownlow has pursued human sources and documents with equal verve. His book sparkles with first-person recountings by film-makers and their crews: Douglas Burden, who made *The Silent Enemy*; Jessica Borthwick, who photographed the Second Balkan War at the age of twenty-two; Lefty Hough, property man on *The Iron Horse*—to give only three random examples.

Now and again, Brownlow's research uncovers unexpected details of incident and technology. Monument Valley appeared in *The Vanishing American* in 1925. Henri Chretien invented the lens that finally evolved into Cinemascope in 1917 as a service to tank drivers. Dr. Lucien Bull of the Institut Marey developed a World War I technique of recording sounds of artillery fire on 35mm film in order to spot emplacements through sound ranging.

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—JOHN L. FELL

A HISTORY OF FILMS

By John L. Fell. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979.

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Shaleen, Jack G., ed. Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978. $10.00 cloth, $4.95 paper.

Nuclear war films deserve better than they get in this ineptly edited and exasperating anthology. The haggard specters of "objectivity" and "realism" haunt virtually every piece in the book. Applied to documentaries, such standards provide a comprehensible, if outmoded, critical base. But when Hollywood features are similarly scrutinized, a review of Arch Oboler's *Five* degenerates into speculation on the real-life effects of radiation on the pregnant heroine's fetus, while *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* is criticized for not providing sufficient detail on Inger Steven's stay in a decompression chamber.

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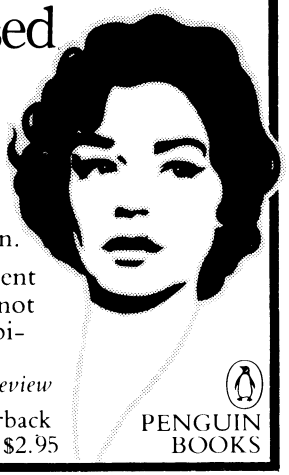
of the 1955 atomic test Operation Cue comes from *Newsweek*, but Jack Shaleen cannot be excused for slamming NBC's *Footnotes on the Atomic Age* on its inconclusive handling of the issue of the safety of US atomic weapons tests, when documents revealing the extent of military and civilian exposure to radiation from these tests are only now being wrested from the Pentagon by Congress: NBC cannot be faulted for not knowing, in 1969, facts that are barely known today. Baffling, too, is Shaleen's omission of even *one* essay on the hundreds of government, military, corporate and educational films produced on the subject of nuclear war, civil defense and radiation from this "comprehensive view of the nuclear film image."

There are some bright spots—Mark Hall's lively piece on *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*, Shaleen's analysis of *Panic in the Year Zero*—but they are few, and the subject deserves at least one film historian who knows something about history, one historian who knows something about film, to relate the genre to the historical forces that produced it and thus bring focus to the disparate information in this anthology.

—JAYNE LOADER

Simone Signoret

Nostalgia Isn't What It Used to Be



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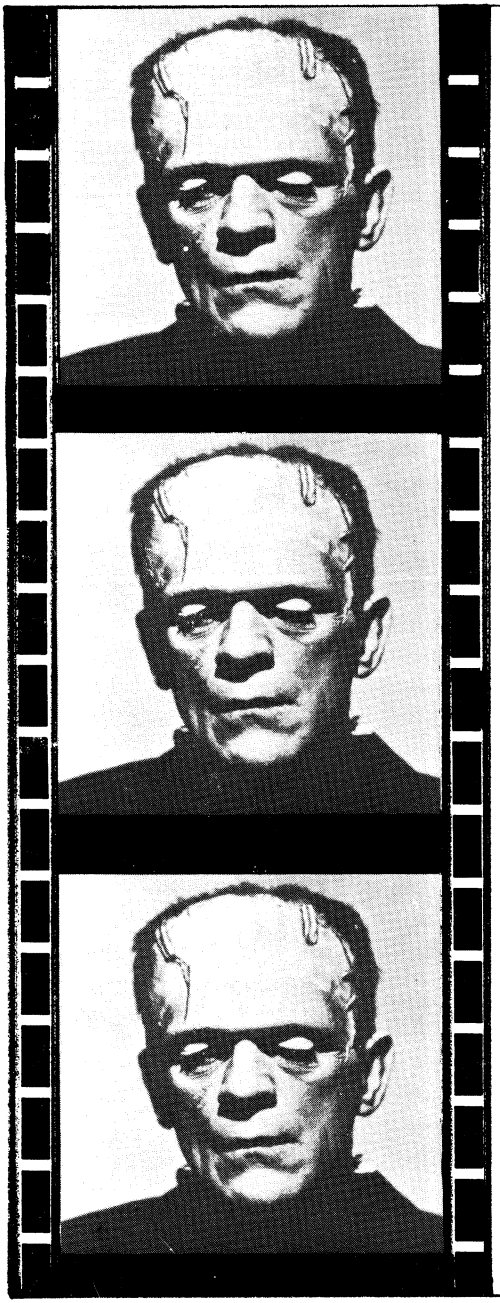
SINGLE-SCREEN FILMS

Ray Gun Virus, 1966, color, 14 min.
Piece Mandala / End War, 1966, color, silent, 5 min.
Word Movie / Fluxfilm 29, 1966, color, sound, 4 min.
N:O:T:H:I:N:G, 1968, color, sound, 36 min.
T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G, 1968, color, sound, 12 min.
S:TREAM:S:S:ECTION:S:ECTION:S:ECTIONED, 1968-71, color, sound, 42 min.
Inferential Current, 1971, color, sound, 8 min.
Analytical Studies I: The Film Frame, 1971-76, color, silent, 25 min.
Axiomatic Granularity, 1972-73, color, sound, 20 min.
Analytical Studies II: Un-Frame-Lines, 1971-76, color, silent, 30 min. at 24 fps, 41 min. at 18 fps.
Analytical Studies III: Color Frame Passages, 1973-74, color, silent, 22 min. at 24 fps, 29 min. at 18 fps.
Analytical Studies IV: Blank Color Frames, 1975-6, color, silent, 19.5 min at 18 fps (only speed allowed)
Color Sound Frames, 1974, color, sound, 27 min.
Apparent Motion, 1975, color, silent, 36 min.
Epileptic Seizure Comparison (single-screen version), 1976, color, sound, 30 min.
Tails, 1976, color, silent, 4 min. at 18 fps or 3 min. at 24 fps.
Episodic Generation (single-screen version), 1977-78, color, sound, 30 min.

DOUBLE PROJECTION FILMS (rental from NY Coop only)

Razor Blades, 1965-8, color & b&w, stereo sound, 25 min.
SYNCHRONOUSOUNDTRACKS, 1973-4, color, stereo sound, 35 min.
Shutter Interface, 1975, color, stereo sound, 26 min.
Dream Displacement, 1976, color, ¼" stereo tape, 24 min.
Declarative Mode, 1976-77, color, silent, 39 min.



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